



HONEYCHOP

Feeding and Management of Senior Horses

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What and how we feed our horses as they get older can impact their health and wellbeing. It can be particularly useful to focus on the types of feeds we use, especially if we are aiming to maintain body condition and accommodate age-related problems such as dental disease and equine Cushing's disease (also known as Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction (PPID)).

Maintaining body condition without increasing risk of laminitis

Some older horses and ponies maintain a healthy body condition throughout the year and their nutritional needs may be like those of younger horses and ponies. However, some older horses and ponies may struggle to maintain their body condition more than younger horses, particularly if they have PPID (equine Cushing's disease)(Menzies-Gow et al., 2024). However these horses and ponies are also at risk of laminitis if they have PPID, and it is important that we don't increase their laminitis risk in the choices of feeds we provide.

It is most ideal to increase their calorie intake per day in a safe way that does not increase their blood insulin levels and laminitis risk. This is best achieved by a diet that focuses on high quality fibre and fat/oil to support weight gain. Also, aim for a diet that is low in non-structural carbohydrates (NSCs), which are also known as soluble sugars and starches (K. Hart et al., n.d.).

Increasing the fat content of a diet for a lean older horse or pony could be achieved by adding vegetable-based oils straight to the feed, or it could be added to a mixed feed or chop that you choose to feed. Often 100-200ml per day (for a 500kg horse) is sufficient, which can be added gradually over a few weeks. It might be handy to add some Vitamin E too when oil intake is increased, and this can be done with a high-quality diet balancer.

High quality fibre can be consumed as pasture, forage, or in the extra feeds that we provide. Keep an eye on the amount of starch and sugar in fibre-based feeds as sometimes they are higher than ideal. As an easy rule of thumb, we can aim for each and every feed we give to contain less than 10% starch and sugar. Using this method, even when a few scoops are fed per day, this does not become a risky amount of starch and soluble sugars. Check out the ingredients or nutritional analysis section of feeds (usually displayed on the feed company's website) to ensure that those you choose are optimal for older horses and ponies.



Always check the label for the list of ingredients and nutritional analysis.

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The Honeychop *free from* Range

- ✓ Soft, short chop fibre blends
- ✓ Free from molasses, cereals and artificial additives
- ✓ Blended with herbs
- ✓ Suitable for laminitics and those prone to gastric ulcers

To find out more about Honeychop feeds, please visit:
www.honeychop.com



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Monitoring your horse's body condition

When we make changes to our older horses' diets, it is a good idea to monitor body condition regularly in the weeks and months afterwards. We can do this using a body condition score, which looks at different parts of the body and adds this information together to make a score. Alternatively, to be a little more accurate, it can be handy to use a weigh-tape, trying to measure around the girth area in a similar place each time. A weigh-bridge is an excellent way to monitor body weight over time, if you are lucky enough to have access to one.

TOP TIP:
If you change your horse's diet, monitor their body condition regularly in the weeks and months afterwards.

Dental disease and fibre length

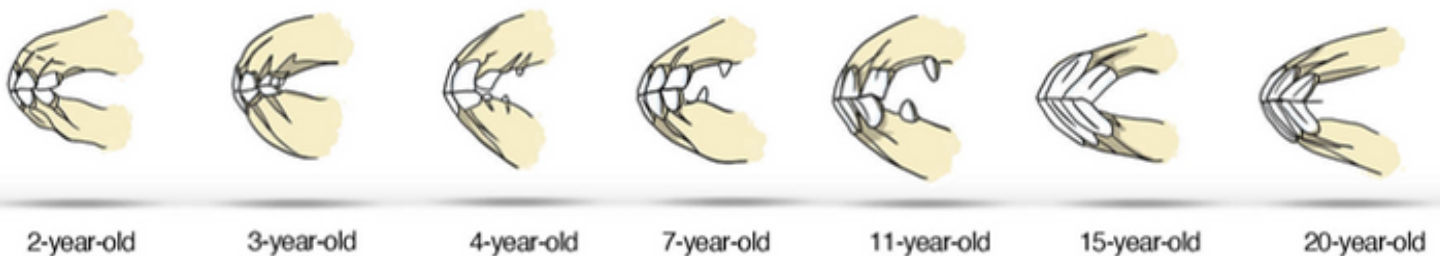
As horses get older, they may encounter dental problems that make it hard for them to chew as effectively as they once did. This might show up as longer fibre length if you check your horse's faeces (Di Filippo et al., 2018), or they may start dropping pads of partly chewed forage/grass when eating (called 'quidding'). If your horse is quidding like this, seek some assistance from your vet or equine dental technician, so they can examine your horse's teeth.

Once any dental disease has been addressed, your horse may still struggle to eat long forage (such as hay) and a good next step might be to offer a short-chopped fibre feed (made of high quality palatable straw or meadow grasses). This short-chopped feed still takes a bit of time to chew compared to sloppy feeds and mashes, so that horses don't rush through their feeds. These short-chopped feeds also allow better mixing of saliva when the horse chews, compared to sloppy feeds or mashes, which helps to buffer gastric juices further down the gastrointestinal tract.



It's important to maintain regular dental check-ups for your older horse and seek veterinary advice quickly if you suspect a dental problem.

How a horse's teeth change as they age:



References

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Menzies-Gow, N. J., Banse, H. E., Duff, A., Hart, N., Ireland, J. L., Knowles, E. J., McFarlane, D., & Rendle, D. (2024). BEVA primary care clinical guidelines: Diagnosis and management of equine pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction. In *Equine Veterinary Journal* (Vol. 56, Issue 2, pp. 220–242). Equine Veterinary Journal Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1111/evj.14009>

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Victoria graduated from Cambridge University in 2006, and worked as an ambulatory equine vet for several years before becoming a resident in Equine Internal Medicine, in March 2009. She became a European and RCVS recognised specialist in Equine Internal Medicine in 2013, and was part of the medicine referral team at Liphook Equine Hospital for more than a decade. More recently, she runs a mobile specialist medicine and ophthalmology service, providing flexible access to specialist skills, knowledge and equipment. In Mar 2025, she graduated from University of Oxford with an MSc in Evidence Based Healthcare. Victoria also works for the FEI and is a Level 1 OV, and Level 2 endurance vet.

