

## WINTERING THE GERIATRIC HORSE

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Depending on where you live, your equine companions may have to tough it through harsh conditions in the winter months. Most horses, no matter what age, entering into the winter season in good condition will do fine on the same routine with only minor changes. But what about the geriatric horse? It is important to realize the difference between old and geriatric. If the aged horse is in good body condition, healthy and active even at 20+ years, he is simply just an older horse, and it may not be necessary to make any special preparations for winter. However, as horses enter their senior years arthritis, dental abnormalities, weight loss and endocrine dysfunction are a few conditions that may classify the aged horse as geriatric. Wintering the geriatric horse is somewhat more challenging, but can be successfully accomplished.

As with human athletes, years of stress, injuries and general wear and tear can result in painful and crippling arthritic changes in older horses. Also as with humans, the cold, damp conditions of winter make arthritis pain even worse. With the proper management you can help. Do not keep your horse confined to a stall unless recommended by your veterinarian for medical purposes. Ideally there should be free access to turnout, but good shelter from the elements should also be available. The more the horse has an opportunity for exercise the better. It is not uncommon for the arthritic horse to become reluctant to lie down due to difficulty in getting back up. Be sure to use enough bedding in his stall if you do need to bring him in. Not only will bedding provide warmth, but it will also provide cushion for elbows and hocks, prime spots for abrasions to occur if the horse struggles to get up or is down for prolonged periods of time. If his stall floor is covered with rubber matting and the straw or shavings are wet, this can be a very slippery surface. Blanketing may also be needed in the more severe winter climates. Proper fit is essential when blanketing any horse. If using a turnout rug, be sure the material is water resistant and breathable. Blankets should only be used if someone is available to check them at least twice a day.

Older horses are more sensitive to severe weather, be it heat or cold, and often suffer weight loss when temperature fluctuations are extreme. Higher energy needs in winter can be met by increasing feed in a more highly digestible form such as pelleted or extruded feeds designed specifically for old horses. Impaction problems can be reduced by insuring free access to clean, fresh, unfrozen water in the winter. Just breaking the ice in the tank will not be enough. There are several devices available to help keep water buckets and stock tanks from freezing and at more optimal temperatures for drinking. If your horse does not drink well, feed water soaked feeds (1-2 gallons of water per feeding) to help increase fluid intake. Poor dentition can result in the inability to adequately chew hay or feed. The geriatric horse should have its teeth checked by an experienced equine dentist at least every six months. If the horse has dental problems that are not correctable (missing teeth, severe wave mouth) it will benefit from a diet of "soups" of soaked hay cubes or beet pulp plus pelleted or extruded feeds offered at least twice a day. Soaked feeds can easily freeze in the winter so only offer amounts that can be consumed in a single meal. Rely on the advice of your veterinarian or nutritionist for the proper recipe for your horse.

Remember, weight loss can certainly be due to many other conditions. If vaccination, deworming and dental care schedules are up-to-date and your aged horse is still not maintaining weight, have your veterinarian perform lab work to check for metabolic disorders, malabsorption, and liver and kidney dysfunctions.

### Summary

Geriatric horses can live for years comfortably. The winter season, however, provides an extra challenge. Adequate shelter, good footing with the ability to exercise freely, free access to fresh, unfrozen water, good quality hay and feed are all necessary for geriatric horses to survive the elements of winter weather.