

Weathering the Winter with Your Veteran

With advances in equine care and medicine horses and ponies are living longer with claims of the oldest in the world being in their fifties and sixties! The winter is always a difficult time of year for our older horses and ponies whether they are retired or still in full work; this article looks at a few areas that can help get them through the winter happy and healthy.

Weight

Underweight or overweight? Using a weigh tape and learning to body condition score your horse through out the year can help spot changes in condition early. Unplanned weight loss can be an indicator of an underlying condition such as liver disease, dental disease and internal parasites. A blood test can confirm liver disease.

Obesity will not help either. Overrugging, overfeeding and reduced exercise can all lead to obesity and this will make medical problems more likely.

Over the winter they may need extra food, but base this on their body condition score. Remember their stomach is only the size of a rugby ball so feeding large feeds will be wasted, little and often will be more effective. Introduce any changes in diet gradually. Vegetable oil added to feeds can be a great fat source that is easily digestible and not bulky or difficult to eat. Speak to a qualified nutritionist for specifics for your horse, most of the reputable feed companies have a nutrition helpline.

Teeth

Be vigilant for signs of tooth problems such as quidding (dropping food), weight loss, pouching food in their cheeks and eating slowly. Regular dental check ups every 6 to 12 months will help keep them eating efficiently. Horses teeth are continuously erupting so become worn over time and the tooth roots get shorter making wobbly teeth more likely. Loose teeth can be painful. It may be necessary to modify their diet, for example sloppy mashes if their teeth are poor may be easier.

Worming

Regular worm egg counts should be performed throughout the year (roughly every 3 months). Remember tapeworm and encysted redworm won't show up on these worm egg counts so control of these should be considered particularly in the Autumn/ Early Winter. Tapeworm can be tested for with a saliva test or a blood test. Unfortunately there is still no effective test for encysted redworm so it is currently recommended that your horse is wormed with a suitable wormer for encysted redworm in the late Autumn, after a few hard frosts.

Vaccinations

Just because they are older and don't go anywhere doesn't mean you should let their vaccinations lapse. Tetanus is still vital as they can pick this up from the soil and is usually fatal if they contract the disease. Flu vaccinations should be considered, as they are still vulnerable even if they no longer compete under rules. If they contract flu it could be much more serious for an older horse, and the recovery period is prolonged. Remember other horses moving to and from the yard could put your horse at risk and the flu virus can travel on the wind from yard to yard. Although a horse not leaving the yard is at a lower risk there is still a risk of contracting the disease, due to the dense horse population in our area.

Feet

Regular trimming or shoeing should be maintained to help keep your horse sound. Foot abscesses and thrush are common problems in the winter. Ensure you regularly pick out their feet and allow some time each day to stand in dry conditions. Horses with a foot abscess typically go severely lame and are reluctant to fully weight bear on the affected leg. A Vet should be called. Treatment will involve pain relief, poulticing and hot tubbing to draw the pus from the foot. Keep epsom salts, poultice and bandaging material in your first aid kit - just in case!

Exercise

Just because your horse is getting older doesn't mean they need to be retired; providing they are still able to do the level of exercise you are asking of them safely and comfortably. Ill health, for example, lameness, reduced vision or heart problems may mean retirement is the best option.

If your horse is retired, options for exercise are limited but it is important they stay mobile, even if this is just them walking around the field every day. Arthritis is common in older horses so keep an eye out for stiffness and lameness. This may start out as a reluctance to hold their leg up for the Farrier. Speak to your Vet regarding treatment options to keep them comfortable. Keeping them on a flatter field rather than a steep hill, and keeping them with companions that don't bully them can help if they are stiff.

Cushings (aka PPID)

Cushings (PPID) is a hormonal disease of older horses caused by changes in the pituitary gland, at the base of the brain. The NEHS survey (2016) reported PPID in the top 5 disease syndromes in UK horses. Symptoms of PPID include laminitis, abnormal hair coat (this can range from mild changes in coat shedding through to a thick curly coat), abnormal fat deposits, loss of muscle and top line, pot belly, patchy and excessive sweating, increased drinking and urination, lethargy and recurrent infections (e.g. foot abscesses, skin infection and sinusitis). PPID can increase the risk of laminitis by five times so it is important to recognise this condition in an attempt to prevent this painful condition. A simple blood test can tell you the answer. Treatment is very effective with very few side effects, although it is life long.

Respiratory Disease

Coughs are common in the winter when horses tend to be stabled for longer periods and fed supplemental hay. A common cause of a cough is recurrent airway obstruction (RAO, or heaves previously known as COPD). This is similar to human asthma and is usually as a result of inhaling allergens. Keep them in a well ventilated stable, use a dust free bedding and ensure hay and haylage are dust free and free from mould. Speak to your Vet if your horse is showing signs of respiratory problems, e.g. nasal discharge, coughing, breathing faster or heavier at rest.

Skin Problems

Be sure to check your horse every day carefully for wounds and problems on the skin. This may sound obvious but a thick winter coat and/ or rug can easily hide lots! Remove the rug every day to look for sores. Run your hands over your horse carefully, easy to do whilst you are grooming. Don't forget to check their legs, particularly under feathers. Heavily feathered types are prone to leg mites which can

cause them to itch and stamp, this can lead to sores under the feathers. Speak to your Vet for treatment options.

Lice love a thick winter coat - look carefully for these parasites, they cause your horse to itch and the coat can often look quite moth eaten with patches where they have rubbed their coat out.

Mudfever has a vast array of treatment options but no one potion is effective for all cases. Usually it is caused by a bacterial infection in the skin but there are other conditions with different causes that can look similar. Wet weather increases the risk of mud fever. Try to ensure your horse has a period where they can stand on dry ground every day to allow the coat and skin to dry thoroughly. Care applying barrier creams as this can cause the skin to be persistently wet and trap bacteria underneath. Rain scald is caused by the same bacteria that cause mudfever. This tends to be seen on the back as scabs.

Eyes

Cataracts are relatively common in older horses. Senile cataracts are usually slowly progressive. As cataracts advance, vision will deteriorate. Signs your horse's vision may not be as good as it was are: spookiness, particularly when changing from bright to low light, startling easily and bumping into things. If you have any concerns about your horses vision, ask your Vet to examine their eyes. When dealing with horses with poor vision it is important to be careful around them; making sure they are aware of where you are, by talking to them.

Companionship

Horses are herd animals and this shouldn't be forgotten as they age, keeping them with a companion can keep them happy.

Adverse Weather

If your horse is unable to be turned out due to snow, ice or flooding, and they have to stay in, ensure they have plenty of fresh water available. You can also soak their hay and make feeds sloppy to encourage water intake in an attempt to reduce the risk of impaction colic as a result of sudden change in routine. If you are unable to turn your horse out for any reason, providing it is safe to do so, take them for a walk to prevent stiffening up or filling of their legs. Be careful turning out on snow or ice as this can cause bruising to the sole.

In cold weather ensure your water troughs are not frozen as reduced drinking can increase their risk of colic. Symptoms of colic include inappetance, increased laying down, rolling, flank watching, kicking at their belly, reduced or no faeces. If you are concerned your horse may have colic, you should contact your Vet as an emergency. If your horse normally lives out, they should always have access to shelter and be checked carefully. Checks should be carried out as a minimum twice per day but this should increase in adverse conditions.

Time to Say Goodbye

As they get older you know this difficult decision may be coming sooner than you would like. Take time to consider your options of how you would like it to happen should the worst happen. If you plan ahead it can avoid you making a rushed decision when you are upset. If you feel their quality of life is deteriorating speak to your Vet who will be able to help you decide when the time is right.

Wishing you all a happy and healthy winter, from all of us at Wendover Heights Equine!

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Kathryn qualified from the Royal Veterinary College in 2009 and has been working in equine practice ever since. Kathryn returned to her home county of Bucks, where she spent her youth as a member of the Whaddon Chase Pony Club and joined Wendover Heights Equine in 2014. Kathryn has a Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice in the area Equine Practice and is particularly interested in internal medicine, ophthalmology and the care of the older horse. Kathryn is also on the treating vet team at the Horse of the Year Show and is a trained race course vet.