

## Caring for an older horse or pony in winter

Older ponies in their twenties have always been useful for teaching children to ride but more owners nowadays are keeping older ex-competition horses going for longer. They all need a bit more care and attention to look and feel well, especially in winter.



Old friends enjoy each other's company

**Stabling** – Most owners like the idea of stabling their older horses and ponies but don't feel guilty if you can't do this as many live for years outdoors as long as they are well fed and have a good quality, warm rug. My vet came to visit a 28 year old thoroughbred who lived out because he was less stiff than when kept in a stable. The vet said older horses living out are fine as long as they are fed extra feed in winter and kept warm and dry.

**Weight loss** – One problem with older horses and ponies is that they lose weight more easily and this can be worrying for their owners. Some older horses, especially thoroughbreds, will lose a lot of weight in winter but will put it on again when the spring grass arrives. Don't worry too much as long as the horse puts the weight on over the spring and summer. If he doesn't, ask your vet to check him out.

**Rugs** – All horses use energy in winter to keep warm and many without rugs can lose a lot of condition. It is said that 80% of a horse's energy goes towards keeping warm in cold weather and you will save money on extra feed by using a rug. A good quality rug should last many years and will not slip or tear like cheaper types. I'm still using a rug I bought eighteen years ago on a 24 year old horse. I've had it washed and repaired over the years and even now it keeps out the rain without ever having been re-proofed.

**Feed** – Older equines need extra food in winter and more protein to keep weight on them. There are professional ready mixed feeds available which are easily digested and, for horses with tooth loss, easier to chew. A vitamin and mineral supplement with probiotics is a good idea and we use Blue Chip Original as a feed supplement. Beet pulp will also help keep weight on and we've found horse owners feeding it to equines in their thirties as it is also easy to digest. Beet pulp should be soaked in water before feeding and it will then add moisture to a dry feed. Most horses love it.

**Teeth** – All horses and ponies should have a check up from an equine dentist once a year. This becomes very important for older equines as they find hay and long stemmed grasses harder to chew. Dentists will 'float' or rasp sharp teeth to help make chewing less painful. If your horse has loose teeth contact a dentist for advice.



Rug ponies & horses to keep condition

**Exercise** – Years ago horses were retired in their teens and the lucky ones were ‘put out to grass’ where they wandered around paddocks for the rest of their lives. Others were put down because they no longer had a value or were considered too expensive to keep. Nowadays that is changing and older equines are still being ridden into their twenties where they still serve a purpose to teach

novice riders. Ponies are often ridden into their thirties.

As with humans, it is now believed to be good to keep older horses going with gentle exercise to help against stiffness and to keep them feeling younger. Our older ones go hacking and do light work in the arena. There are plenty of stretching and loosening dressage exercises a horse in his twenties can do, even at a walk. An old dressage horse makes a perfect school master, as long as he’s well behaved. All we need now is a ‘Pilates for Horses’ exercise regime! Works for humans so why not for our four legged friends? Gentle regular exercise for twenty to thirty minutes is better than strenuous exercise every once in a while. You can also take a horse or pony for a walk on a lead rope like a dog. This works well with older and very young horses as it provides variety and interest and will also help to keep the owner fit.

©Horse and Pony Info 2010