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VOL. 7

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A 'WHOLISTIC' Way of Training

This Olympian and U.S. Dressage Technical Coach explains how to build trust for the horse's mind and balance for his body.

By Debbie McDonald with Beth Baumert ■ Photos by Mary Cornelius



Trust is the basis of the most successful work trainers and riders do. When it comes to starting young horses, there are countless methods, but the best of them always gain the horse's trust from the beginning. Then throughout his training, the horse must never be put in a position where he feels threatened or vulnerable. He should never feel that there is no way out.

Because of my small size—I'm only 5 feet—I need to be able to communicate with my horses in this relaxed, trusting way. Some of the horses who came our way at Peggy and Parry Thomas' River Grove Farm, in Sun Valley, Idaho, where I had trained horses for nearly 40 years, had already been started and may never have experienced the kind of communication and trust I need. For example, when we would get a horse from an auction, for the first 30 days, I returned to how we started horses at the farm (see sidebar, "Starting the Young Horse," page 5).

Slowly, we build our communication skills on the ground and under-saddle until the horse yields quietly to light pressure and understands turning, walking, stopping and backing. The whole point is to get away from being rough by taking this initial time for building trust. It doesn't take aggression to get this done. Most riders buy horses who are already started, but keep this basis of trust in mind before going on to the next step in your training.

When it comes to starting young horses, there are countless methods, but the best of them always gain the horse's trust from the beginning, says Debbie McDonald, here with Adrienne Lyle and Harmony's Duvall.

Ride in Balance

When horse and rider are balanced, they can be relaxed. And while you're tending to the balance in your horse's body, he'll become more relaxed in his mind.

During my travels around



ABOVE: Adrienne canters Dax outside of the arena in a two-point position to encourage him to cover more ground. He does this because she has allowed him to move more freely under her.

LEFT: To find the ideal balance with Schufro Gold, Debbie rides transitions within and between the gaits in shoulder-fore.

the United States when I served as the U.S. dressage developing coach, I found one major misconception about training among riders at all levels: They often sacrificed the balance by riding too forward.

When a rider thinks her horse needs to go more forward, she sometimes ends up running him off his feet, which creates tension and a loss of balance. As a result, her horse loses natural suspension and his good gaits become average very quickly. Also, horses working in poor balance often develop soundness issues. On the other hand, if you let your horse progress

and evolve with a relaxed body, you can take an average horse and make him above average.

Here's an example of what I see often: A judge remarks on a test, "Not covering enough ground." Many riders misinterpret this comment and will push strongly with the leg and the seat, which actually creates less ground cover along with tension. Holding with your hand, leg and seat too much will stifle your horse's movement.

Instead of driving, try to lighten your seat a little and see if your horse will just go. If you want to canter with more ground-covering strides, take him out to a field and get in a two-point position. I guarantee your horse will cover more ground because you will have allowed him to move freely under you. You'll see the result on the following day when you have a happier, more balanced, free-moving horse. Variety also will improve your horse. If you don't have access to

trails, find a way to make training fun for your horse so you don't drill him six days a week.

Develop Balance

When working on your horse's balance, keep in mind that horses can't be balanced under unbalanced riders. We always need to begin with the education and balance of the rider.

Rider Education

In comparing U.S. riders to Europeans, I think we're behind them in education for two reasons. First, many people aren't even seeking education. They must feel they don't need it, which is a dangerous path. For real horsemen, there's never a time when they can't learn more. Every day I learn something new, which is what makes my job exciting. How awful it would be to think I knew it all. Also,



"First, many people aren't even seeking education. They must feel they don't need it, which is a dangerous path. For real horsemen, there's never a time when they can't learn more."

education is lacking because of the size of our country. We now have many good trainers, but there aren't enough to help in every area of the country.

Rider Balance

When it comes to balance, you can't hope to be in the middle of your horse if the saddle isn't in the middle. Too often, I see saddles that either put the rider in the back seat or to one side. Then how can the horse find his center? When your saddle sits correctly, you can then find your balance with longe lessons. When you sit in balance, your aids can be used with skill and independence to balance your horse. Work with a saddle fitter to ensure your saddle fits correctly or ask for referrals within your riding community to find one.

Horse Comfort

A poorly fitted saddle, in addition to making you unbalanced, can make your horse sore, which is the cause of many a bad attitude. A horse in pain will never be

in balance because he'll always be trying to shift himself to find a comfortable place. Fortunately, we're getting better at educating people about saddle fitting. Our horses do a lot for us, and it's our job to listen to them and be sure we never ask them to do more than they can do. Palpating them is critical to success. Use your hands on your horse's body to look for places that might be sore or developing unevenly. Only when your horse is comfortable and you're in balance can you teach him to find a rhythm and a better balance. You'll do that with transitions and shoulder-fore.

Transitions and Shoulder-fore

The basis for your horse's transitions began on the ground when he learned to go, stop and turn from a verbal cue and very light pressure. Then before you even get on, he understands the "brake" and the "gas," and he has a "turn signal" on either

side. He knows how to turn left and right.

Under-saddle, many riders are then inclined to let their young horses run to tire them, but if you're in the dressage world, you don't want to take out the brilliance, even when your horse is a baby. You might need to let him trot around a little, but you don't want to wear him down. You want him to manage the atmosphere because he trusts you enough to relax. Ideally, you want your horse to feel energetic but relaxed and balanced.

To achieve this, work on transitions between the gaits as soon as you can in your warm-up: Walk-halt-walk. Walk-trot-walk-trot. Trot-canter-trot-canter. Try to ride the transitions in shoulder-fore. In shoulder-fore, your horse's inside hind should track between his two front feet and his outside hind stays in the track of his outside fore. This teaches your horse to position himself so his inside hind leg can learn to carry in balance. As he gets

Starting the Young Horse

At Peggy and Parry Thomas' River Grove in Sun Valley, Idaho, we had a wonderful cowboy who worked the horses in a quiet way. First, he walked the babies around on the ground in a snaffle bridle and got them used to new things. He led them without pulling on their mouths. Rather, the horses were led mostly from the pressure of the bridle while, at the same time, they were getting used to having a bit in their mouths.

A good cowboy will physically hold the horse's tail and gently turn him from his nose to teach him to follow his tail. It's similar to carrot stretches but they walk in a circle. Then they quietly change directions. This work teaches the horse to turn in a very quiet, soft way. Then they go straight, and the cowboy asks the horse to halt from a little pressure and back up—not from the bridle but from a little tap on the chest. This way the horse learns to follow the hand, turn right, turn left and move his body around. This is how I like to start a young horse.

Once a young horse is under-saddle, some people need to trot right off, but I might prefer to just walk for a few days. Beware of side reins in the early stages of a horse's training and coming behind him with a whip to make him go forward before he's had any experience with contact. That can frighten him, and then what kind of relationship do you have? Take it slow.

more educated, his balance changes and develops—bit by bit, his weight will shift from his forehand to his hindquarters—and by First Level he can do the more difficult transition: trot-halt-trot.

By Second Level, your horse can do



ABOVE: Riding shoulder-in on Harmony's Duvall, Adrienne shows that very little hand is needed because he is balanced and listening to her body language.

LEFT: Gymnastic work will always improve your horse because it honors the integrity of his body. Here Debbie rides a turn on the haunches on Schufro Gold, which also helps him concentrate on her.

walk–canter–walk—also in shoulder-fore. As he gets sophisticated, those transitions start to shift his weight back and lighten his forehand even more. When he's educated through the levels in the right way, you get seamless transitions that happen because of your body language—which we'll talk about later.

Transitions within each gait are helpful, too: Working–lengthening–working, collected–medium–collected, medium–extended–medium. In the beginning, you want to ask for just a bit of collection and then let your horse go forward again. Be cognizant of his strength level and collect only as much as he is able. Overdoing it would be comparable to you doing squats for a long time. This is where rider education comes into play. You need to know

if your horse is strong enough and know when he can be pushed to get a little stronger. Ideally, your trainer watching from the ground can help you strive for the right kind of goals.

Goals Can Be Your Enemy

We need to have goals, but the goal can also be your enemy if you don't listen to what your horse is saying. Here's an example: Your goal is to do Third Level in the spring. You have great simple changes, but the flying changes are tense and out of balance. At this point, you can go down a very dangerous path. While the focus is on getting the changes, riders often don't notice when they start to lose the quality of the canter. They're focused on wanting

the horse to be more together, more engaged, more this and more that instead of focusing on the quality of the canter.

This isn't an uncommon situation, but when the horse can do a simple change (walk–canter–walk), he can almost always do a flying change. You, however, have to be picky. Repetition of those simple changes doesn't always improve the horse; good repetition improves him. In the upward transition from walk to canter, did your horse slip into a few trot steps or did he accelerate? If so, you need to walk and pick up the canter again with a prompt, clean transition that goes from a four-beat walk to a three-beat canter. You have to control the rhythm and the relaxation. When your horse can demonstrate an excellent canter depart from walk, think about what your aids were, and ask yourself:

■ *How big were my aids?* If the transition was good, they were probably quite small.



■ *Did I put my outside leg way back?*

Probably not.

■ *Did I throw my weight to the inside?*

Probably not.

■ *Did I throw my reins away?* Probably not.

is what's missing because she thinks she needs to physically help, so she throws around her body. Those important details of the aids get lost in the goal.

People also forget that horses learn in



Positive repetition is meaningful because you repeat something until your horse gives you a good response, and then you reward him and stop doing it.

Now when you go to do a change, do it with the same beautiful balance that you had in the walk-canter transition. Don't let your aids put your horse out of balance. Often when a rider has trouble with changes, her understanding of the change

different time frames and not every horse will do Grand Prix at 9 years old. That's OK. There shouldn't be a rush to move any horse up a level. In addition, not every horse ends up being what you want him to be. The time comes, in some cases,

Debbie checks to be sure Schufro Gold is in balance from aids other than her hands: She pats him on the inside neck and he doesn't lose the bend, rhythm or balance.

when you have to say, "Do I continue down this path where neither one of us is happy or do I find this horse a new home?" That's a difficult place to be, but most riders experience it at some point in time. Pushing to the goal gets in the way of our primary job as trainers—to

preserve our horses' health and mentality.

Gymnastics for Better Balance

Gymnastic work that honors the integrity of your horse's body will always improve him. Walk in shoulder-fore or renvers, do a turn on the haunches, then a turn on the forehand. Trot or canter and move your horse around to get his mind concentrating on you. It's fun for him.

Use positive repetition as opposed to drill. Positive repetition is meaningful because you repeat something until your horse gives you a good response, and then you reward him and stop doing it. You move on to something else. For example, a Grand Prix horse doesn't need to school the steep half-pass as it is in the test. You can do that steep half-pass for only a few meters and if you're pleased with it, you can pat him and move on to something else. Likewise, if your horse accomplishes everything you wanted in 25 minutes, take him out of the ring and go on a hack. You can use the extra time for fitness rather than drilling. This will keep your horse's mind and body in a good place.

Body Language For Light Aids

Every horse is different, of course, and some horses, especially at the upper levels, can be a bit stronger in the hands, but that is because their engines are working hard, which is a good thing. You always want to ride your horse from back to front.

By this I mean that in the working trot and canter, you want to feel as if you could easily access medium or extended



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The result of building a horse's trust and balance from the start of a partnership: Adrienne and Wizard, here at the 2013 World Dressage Masters in Wellington, Florida, were together for many years. Adrienne was so clear with her aids that she could ask Wizard to come back into the high-level collection of pirouette with mainly her body language and very light rein aids.

work—that your horse could take you in those gaits. But that doesn't mean he should be impossible to carry in your hands or that he's running forward. Again, it's having the education to know and feel that your horse is moving forward in front of your leg in a balanced way. You can accomplish this with clear aids and a little use of a dressage whip. Be careful, however, not to let the whip become a crutch. I see many riders who use the whip instead of their legs, sometimes becoming unaware they are doing this. If you need the whip, use it and be done with it. Avoid nagging with it. Ride with clear aids to keep your horse sharp.

When your horse is listening to your clear aids and moving from his engine in balance, you can start to wean him off your hands and he will listen more and more to your body language. Your normal rein aids can get quieter and quieter as your horse starts to understand your seat and weight aids.

When I see that a rider has done a beautifully balanced canter pirouette without needing much help from the hands, I ask her to get up in a half-seat, pat the horse and let him stretch long and low. He will, of course, think he's done, but then I say: "Pick up your reins just lightly and bring him back to that same collected canter with just your body language—not with your hands." The minute you feel him start to collect without your hand, praise him. Then, with just your body, say, "Come a little more on the spot." You can wean your horse off the hand this way and ride with very small aids. It's fun to see riders learn that they can do it easily. If you are ever able to watch Olympian Steffen Peters in the warm-up arena, you'll see that he does this all the time, but anyone can do it in whatever exercise you're working on if you just let yourself believe that where you put your body can tell your horse to come back. You'll need very little hand. If you're able to do that perfect

pirouette or the movements you currently are working on and you need only your hands for little reminding aids, then you can return to collection with only your body language.

As you work, you can check to be sure your horse is in balance from aids other than your hands: Occasionally, pat him on the inside neck, and ideally, he won't lose the bend, the rhythm or the balance.

When you and your horse are in bal-

✱ When you and your horse are in balance, the connection will always be good and you can ride any movement with light aids."

ance, the connection will always be good and you can ride any movement with light aids. I'm not saying that you won't need to make your horse sharp and in front of your leg, and I'm not saying you won't ever need a strong half-halt. But if you're riding with a strong seat and leg all the time, then your light aids won't work. When you ride your horse correctly in balance, you don't need to use a lot of strength. Let this balance become a part of your everyday riding. Educate yourself, listen to your horse and ride thoughtfully. 🐾

*With Peggy and Parry Thomas' Brentina, **Debbie McDonald** helped lead the U.S. Dressage Team to a silver medal at the 2002 World Equestrian Games and bronze medals at the 2004 Athens Olympics and the 2006 WEG. They also competed in the 2008 Olympics. In 2003, the pair became the first American combination to win the FEI World Cup™ Dressage Final. They also earned team and individual gold medals at the 1999 Pan-American Games. From 2010–2018, Debbie was the U.S. Equestrian Federation Developing Dressage Coach. Since 2018, she has served as the USEF Technical Advisor and Chef d'Equipe. She also has trained top U.S. riders such as Laura Graves and Adrienne Lyle.*



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HEAD TO HOOF: SENIOR HORSE HEALTH CONCERNS

By Sushil Dulai Wenholtz

Help your horse age gracefully by understanding the most common issues facing senior equines.

Thanks to improvements in veterinary care, nutrition and management, horses today live longer than ever. Your favorite equine might easily celebrate birthdays into his 20s or even 30s. Still, most horses start showing some signs of aging in their mid to late teens. And, unfortunately, some studies report that 70 percent of horses 20 years old or older have some type of health problem requiring veterinary care or changes in management.

Maybe that's not surprising, since a 15-year-old horse is roughly equivalent to a 50-year-old human. At age 20, your horse is like a 60-year-old and at 25, like a 70-year-old.

But senior horse health problems don't have to mean the end of your horse's happy days. The key is early detection, says Lisa Kivett, DVM, MS, DACVIM, of Foundation Equine Clinic in Southern Pines, North Carolina. "When we can identify a problem very early, when it's just getting started, it's usually fairly easy and inexpensive to treat," she says. "This also keeps the horse from experiencing pain or discomfort

since we're able to tackle his issue before he really knows he has one."

With that in mind, Dr. Kivett and Jaime Lehfeldt, DVM, cVMA, CVMMP, DACVIM, of Montana Equine in Billings, Montana, provide a head-to-hoof look at some key issues your older horse might face—plus some tips to help you keep your horse feeling comfortable during those senior years.

Teeth/Dental

"Dental problems are one of the most widely recognized complications of aging in a horse," says Dr. Kivett. "Though modern horse management and advances in veterinary medicine have dramatically increased a horse's projected life span, the teeth often wear out before a domestic horse reaches the end of his natural life."

As a horse ages, teeth not only become worn, but can also fall out or develop sharp points on the outside of the upper cheek teeth and inside of the lower teeth, simply from normal chewing, adds Dr. Lehfeldt. The horse may develop



Like humans, horses experience health challenges as they age. Learn how you can recognize, prevent and treat common problems.

Read the Signs

Age is just a number and simply because your horse turns 15, 20 or even 25, doesn't automatically mean he's old. Instead of relying on the calendar, watch for these telltale signs that indicate it's time to start thinking of and treating your horse as a senior citizen.



Gray hairs around a horse's eyes and muzzle are a common sign of aging.

- Graying hair, particularly around the eyes and muzzle
- Deepening hollows above the eyes
- Slackening or drooping of the lower lip
- Elongation of incisors
- Difficulty eating
- Weight loss (or, less commonly, weight gain)
- Poor coat condition and/or delayed shedding
- Loss of muscle tone, particularly over the topline
- Loss of ligament and tendon strength, which could lead to lower, more sloping pasterns
- General stiffness and reduced overall flexibility
- Reduced energy level

sensitivity due to wear and exposure of the roots of the teeth. Other dental issues that may develop later in life, she says, include "improper alignment of the jaw and teeth, arthritis in the temporomandibular joint [TMJ], which is the joint that makes the jaw move, and ulcerations and



An older horse can often suffer from dental issues such as missing or sensitive teeth, which could contribute to weight loss. Offering him a complete senior feed or chopped forage can make it easier for him to chew, digest and absorb nutrients from his food.

abscessed teeth."

Dr. Kivett adds that horses, like humans, can even get cavities, tartar and gingivitis. "The older a horse, the more likely it is that he will be suffering from one of these dental diseases and they're often quite painful," she says. Unfortunately, many owners discount the possibility of dental problems if their horses haven't lost weight and appear to be eating normally. "This is problematic since horses frequently don't show any outward signs of a dental problem until there is severe pain and major problems," she says.

What you can do: Keep up on regular dental exams—every six months is the typical recommendation for older horses. This can help your vet spot trouble early. Also be prepared to call the vet between exams if your horse loses weight, has difficulty chewing, chokes, routinely drops food while eating or has long fibers or grain in his manure—all signs of potential dental issues.

Eyes

While age-related eye problems aren't as common in horses as in other species, older equines are still more prone to difficulties than younger ones.

"They can develop cataracts and problems with the retina and other structures

in the back of the eye," says Dr. Kivett.

On the bright side, Dr. Lehfeldt notes that cataracts "rarely result in complete cloudiness of the lens" and horses can typically compensate well for changes in vision.

Older horses are commonly affected with equine recurrent uveitis, also known as moon blindness. In this disease, the body's immune system attacks its own tissues—in this case, the tissues of the eye. Over time, this can lead to scarring, cataracts, pain and even blindness.

What you can do: Watch for any changes in the appearance of your horse's eyes, such as tearing, squinting or alterations in the color of the cornea. "If the eye appears cloudy, has a bluish tint anywhere, has a spot on it or is otherwise different from its normal appearance, have it seen by a vet," says Dr. Kivett. "Recognizing symptoms of eye problems quickly can lead to faster diagnosis and treatment, which reduces the risk for permanent damage."

Once a horse has uveitis, treatment is aimed at decreasing inflammation, controlling pain and minimizing further damage to hopefully delay blindness.

Endocrine System

The endocrine system involves the glands that make and secrete hormones. Endocrine diseases rank alongside dental

problems as a leading cause of senior horse health trouble—and the most often overlooked in the early stages, says Dr. Kivett. Probably the most common of these diseases is pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (PPID), also known as Cushing's Disease.

PPID results from a benign tumor in the pituitary gland at the base of the brain, leading to a reduction in dopamine production. PPID can affect many hormones and thus create "a plethora of clinical signs, such as weight loss, chronic recurring infections, lethargy, diarrhea, foot abscesses, laminitis and overall malaise," says Dr. Lehfeldt.

Many horse owners are skeptical that their horse could have PPID if he doesn't exhibit the disease's characteristic long, curly hair coat, says Dr. Kivett. "Unfortunately, by the time a senior horse has this coat, his condition is often so out of control that it's very difficult to regulate with medication," she adds.

Dr. Lehfeldt agrees, noting, "I will have horse owners state that their old horse isn't acting the same anymore, and they chalk it up to just 'being older,' when in fact it could be PPID, which is manageable, especially when identified early in the course of the disease process."

What you can do: Your best offense is spotting the early signs of PPID. These include "changes in body weight or loss of topline, a slight bulging appearance to the eyes—which is a result of fat being deposited behind the eyes—recurrent skin infections or hoof abscesses, or changes in exercise



© PAULA DA SILVA/ARND NI

Endocrine diseases such as PPID (Cushing's) are common problems for senior horses. Horses with Cushing's typically exhibit a long, curly coat and show signs such as weight loss, diarrhea, laminitis and other serious health issues.

Routine Matters

"I often hear horse owners say, 'My [senior] horse doesn't need any more vaccines. He's had enough in his life,'" says Dr. Kivett. "This is completely wrong!" In fact, she adds, keeping up with a regular vaccination routine is even more important for older horses, who have decreased immune function and decreased immune response to vaccinations. That leaves them more susceptible than younger horses "to the diseases that we vaccinate against, like influenza, West Nile virus and eastern equine encephalitis," she says.

Some owners also have told her they're less worried about vaccinating because if their horse gets one of the diseases, they'll have the horse euthanized. "But dying of eastern equine encephalitis is a horrible way to go for a horse," cautions Dr. Kivett. "And an emergency call and humane euthanasia will cost more than several years' worth of vaccines."

Likewise, plan to maintain your older equine on a good deworming program. "The declining immune system of an older horse may leave him more susceptible to parasitism," explains Dr. Kivett. "It isn't uncommon for us to see a horse that has routinely had negative fecal egg counts suddenly begin to shed high numbers of parasite eggs."



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Don't skip your horse's regular vaccinations just because he's getting older—senior horses have decreased immune function and are often more susceptible than younger horses to diseases such as influenza and West Nile virus.

tolerance or sweating patterns," says Dr. Kivett. In addition, your horse may exhibit lethargy, decreased athleticism and fatty deposits on the crest of the neck and tail head. Your vet can run blood tests to look for changes in the horse's hormone levels.

Unfortunately, there's no cure for PPID, but it can be managed with pergolide, a medication originally used for human patients with Parkinson's disease. "The medication can help reduce the size of the pituitary gland and therefore affect the hormones produced by the gland," explains Dr. Lehfeldt. It can improve the horse's symptoms and quality of life, although it must be given for the rest of the horse's life.

Dr. Lehfeldt notes that other management strategies may come into play depending on the horse's clinical signs. "For example, a horse that has foundered should have lower sugars in his diet and may have restricted intake if he is obese," she says. "A thin horse will need a more calorically dense feed with smaller fiber size to digest it more efficiently to aid in weight gain."

Back/Spine

A swayback is a classic old-horse stereotype. While the abnormal hollowing may have a genetic component or may develop due to conformation, pregnancy and strain, age can certainly be a contributing factor. In addition, a general loss of topline musculing—even if it doesn't lead to a swayback—is often seen in older horses, says Dr. Kivett.

"[It] can be related to metabolic disease like PPID that weakens the tendons and ligaments. It can also be due to decreasing fitness and exercise intensity if an older horse isn't being worked as consistently as he was when he was younger," she explains.

Arthritis—a common older-horse concern—can also affect the vertebrae of the horse's spine.

What you can do: "Regular exercise, including working over poles, can help maintain a horse with a swayback or one with spinal injuries," says Dr. Lehfeldt. "Modalities such as acupuncture and spinal manipulation [chiropractic] can be very helpful to maintain motion in the

What About Cancer?

While cancer can strike at any age, and horses are less affected than many other species, the risk does increase with age. "Gray horses are particularly prone to developing melanoma as they age and horses with pink skin (especially of the eyelids, lips and genitals) are prone to squamous cell carcinoma," says Dr. Kivett.

If you see any "areas of irregular skin or masses, call your veterinarian," says Dr. Lehfeldt. "One of the benefits to having yearly health exams done by a veterinarian is to ensure these are identified early in the course so they can be treated sooner versus later."

Benign but Serious: Strangulating Lipoma

While not cancerous, Drs. Kivett and Lehfeldt note that older horses can be at higher risk for another type of tumor—a condition called a strangulating lipoma. While the lipoma itself is a benign fatty tumor, it can develop a stalk or stem that wraps around part of the horse's intestine, cutting off blood flow and leading to severe colic, explains Dr. Lehfeldt. Unfortunately, there is no way to detect this tumor early and it usually isn't discovered until the horse is in colic surgery.

musculoskeletal system, reducing the formation of arthritis and making [the horse] more comfortable."

Digestive System, Nutrition, Weight

Gut health, nutrition and weight are, not surprisingly, intertwined. All can cause health concerns for senior horses and may be related to other older-horse health issues. For instance, seniors may be at



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Aging horses develop a swayback for a variety of reasons—conformation, pregnancy, loss of muscle, arthritis or a metabolic disease like PPID.

higher risk for impaction colic, says Dr. Lehfeldt. This can be due to dental trouble that makes chewing difficult, leading to longer food fibers reaching the large colon, where they can become impacted. Another cause, she adds, could be decreased gut motility if a horse isn't moving as much due to arthritis, injury or other discomfort.

Poor gut health can also contribute to weight loss, a common occurrence in older horses. "Some will become less efficient at absorbing nutrients from the gastrointestinal tract and may not be able to utilize the nutrients the same due to underlying illnesses," says Dr. Lehfeldt. In fact, some research shows that horses age 20 and older are less able to digest protein, fiber and some minerals than younger horses.

Other underlying causes of weight loss can include dental problems, parasites, chronic pain leading to decreased appetite and inflammatory bowel disease.

On the other hand, says Dr. Kivett, some older horses will suddenly become "air ferns" and gain weight despite being on a diet. This could be caused by a metabolic disease or simply be a result of less activity. It's a concern because an overweight horse adds more stress to feet, muscles and joints that may already be worn from years of use.

What you can do: Switching feeds may make it easier for your horse to chew, digest and absorb his food, helping to minimize colic risk and weight loss. For instance, you can switch from regular hay to forage that's chopped, cubed or in pellet form, and grain that's rolled, crimped,

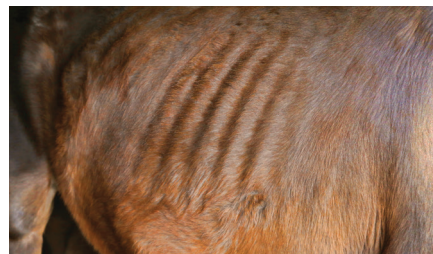
extruded, pelleted or flaked.

Complete senior equine feeds are typically designed with these formulations in mind. In addition, while they should contain enough fiber to keep the digestive tract working, they may provide energy more from carbohydrates and fat than from fiber.

You may also find that it helps to increase your horse's total feed intake, but to provide it through more frequent and smaller meals throughout the day. If your horse's teeth are extremely worn, you might consider wet food, such as mashes. This also helps ensure that your horse takes in enough water, as thirst perception can sometimes wane in senior equines, leading to dehydration concerns.

Joints

Lameness is the most common problem of older horses and often among the first signs of aging. Arthritis is frequently the underlying cause of the unsoundness. "It is often simply the result of wear and tear over time. Any horse that lives and works long enough will inevitably develop some arthritis," says



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Dental trouble, poor gut health, parasites and chronic pain are a few reasons that a senior horse could exhibit significant weight loss.

Age and Reproductive Ability

Both mares and stallions can remain reproductively sound well into their senior years—with some caveats. For instance, mare fertility typically starts to decline around age 15 and decreases with every passing year. Older maiden mares, in particular, will be harder to get in foal. In general, you may need to breed your mare during more heat cycles to get a confirmed pregnancy. Pregnancy loss also increases with age.

For stallions, arthritis that prevents them from mounting a mare (or a breeding dummy) is a top factor limiting longevity in the breeding shed. However, semen production can also fall off with age. Owners of senior stallions will probably need to begin limiting their books, particularly for live covers.

If you're thinking of breeding an older horse, be sure to have your veterinarian or an equine reproductive specialist evaluate him or her for any obvious issues. And talk with her about potential management strategies that could increase your chances of putting healthy foals on the ground.

Dr. Kivett. Arthritis, of course, can lead to pain, stiffness, reduced range of motion and lowered performance ability.

What you can do: "Looking for the signs of stiffness and soreness after work or when [the horse is] not worked regularly is important," says Dr. Lehfeldt. Acupuncture and chiropractic work may help prevent arthritis or reduce discomfort for an already arthritic horse, she adds.

Joint supplements also abound, offering the possibility of pain management. "Every individual is different with how he responds



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Many senior horse health problems are often managed with early detection. Stay vigilant with your daily care and schedule regular vet exams to give your aging equine the best chance to enjoy his golden years.

to these products because of the variation in absorption from the gastrointestinal tract," says Dr. Lehfeldt. "More direct products, such as Adequan® [polysulfated glycosaminoglycan], Legend® [hyaluronate sodium] and intra-articular injections are also available for treating arthritis."

Feet/Hooves

Metabolic conditions such as PPID can predispose your horse to laminitis and increase the risk of recurrent hoof abscesses, say Drs. Lehfeldt and Kivett.

What you can do: Keep an eye out for early signs of PPID so you have a better opportunity to manage the disease and its repercussions. In addition, keep up with regular farrier visits. "When horses get older, they still require foot care," reminds Dr. Lehfeldt. "Due to arthritis that may have developed over time and with an athletic career, taking care of their feet is critical for comfort."

Also, if your horse shows signs of weakening hoof walls (such as cracking, chipping or flares), talk with your veterinarian or farrier about causes and solutions, including the potential benefits of a biotin feed supplement.

Exercise Tolerance

As the experts noted, typically with age comes arthritis—and that can mean

your horse isn't able to perform as he did in his younger years. Additional problems, such as other lameness issues, weight loss or breathing trouble can force a horse into decreased use or retirement, says Dr. Kivett.

When and whether you're forced to scale back on exercise depends on your horse because every equine ages differently. "Some won't be able to do everything they did as a younger horse, whereas others will

be able to go strong until the day they die," says Dr. Lehfeldt.

What you can do: "Let your horse tell you what he can handle as far as workload goes," says Dr. Lehfeldt. If the regular workload gets harder, then cut back on intensity or duration. As a general rule, try to keep at least some exercise in your horse's routine.

"I am a huge proponent of exercise for older horses," adds Dr. Kivett. "If a horse is sound enough and healthy enough to continue some form of exercise—and most are, even it's just at a walk—frequent, low-intensity exercise is the best thing an owner or rider can do for an older horse." It can help maintain tendon, ligament and muscle strength, keep blood flowing to the feet and help increase insulin sensitivity. "Older horses who stay active are proven to be more sound and often just seem happier by keeping a routine," she notes.

Preparation Is Key

Ultimately, every horse, like every human, will age and most will experience health challenges in the process. By understanding common issues and knowing what you can do to prevent, treat or manage them, you can put the odds in your horse's favor for a longer, healthier, happier life. 🐾



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