

Health Care for the Older Horse: Not so Geriatric Anymore!

Geriatrics: a branch of veterinary medicine that deals with the problems and diseases of the aged veterinary patient. The productive life of a horse has increased to a point that we need to start taking into account the changes that take place as they age. At one time the productive or serviceable life of a horse was considered to be 8-12 years of age. This does not hold true anymore. With the advancements of veterinary medicine we can easily extend this into late teens and even into the 20's. Horses are easily living to see 30 years of age and beyond. At a conference this fall for equine veterinarians the room was polled to see who was treating the oldest horse and multiple veterinarians had horses in their 40's. The oldest horse was 52 years of age.

The reasons for longer productive life and life-span include:

1. New and improved medical knowledge and treatments
2. Better dental care
3. Improved deworming protocols
4. Early detection of disease
5. Better nutrition

With the advancement of geriatric veterinary medicine we now have the capability to identify and rectify medical conditions that only affect the aged horse allowing us to keep them productive for significantly more years. In order to treat these changes we have to be able to identify them. The physical appearance of the horse can help us identify some of these medical conditions, but blood work advances allow us to identify some of these conditions before they become physically evident. Some of the changes that we can see include:

Swaying of back	Unthrifty, rough, dull hair coat
Slow to shed hair coat	Poor condition, pot belly
Lack of muscle tone	Fat deposits along tail head, prepuce, and neck
Lack of joint flexibility	Incisor teeth elongation
Graying of hair	Reduced feed utilization
Lameness	Hoof abnormalities
Tendon laxity	

Some of the earliest signs of aging are unsoundness and difficulty moving. One of the most common owner observed problems of the aging horse is arthritis. As veterinarians we are trained to look for the more subtle signs that lead us to diagnose the problem before it becomes more clinically apparent.

The Conley & Koontz Equine Hospital recommends our [Geriatric Wellness Program](#) as a preventative measure for early detection and implementation of medical management for the changes your horse is going through physically and physiologically. This program was established as an aid for you and your veterinarian to detect and establish baseline values for some of the most common problems affecting the aged horse. Appropriate medical intervention will allow your horse to live a long and healthy life.

The Geriatric Wellness Program includes:

1. Complete Physical Examination and Oral Examination
2. Lameness evaluation
3. Complete Blood Count and Chemistry Profile
4. Blood Insulin, Glucose, and ACTH
5. Patient Specific Medical Plan:
 - a. Vaccination
 - b. Deworming
 - c. Dental
 - d. Medical Therapy
 - e. Nutritional consultation

Based on the initial findings of the physical and oral examination, as well as blood results, our veterinarians will report to you personally any of their findings and recommendations. Some of the findings may direct the veterinarian to perform additional tests and diagnostics for the treatment of your aged horse. These reports and findings serve as a baseline for your horse's health which will direct us for many years to come.

We highly recommend our Geriatric Wellness Program for all horses over 15 years of age.