

Survey Assessment of Nutrition, Exercise and Overall Health of Geriatric Horses in New England

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Objective – To describe the nutrition, exercise management and overall health of older horses (≥ 20 years of age) in comparison to the management and health of younger horses in New England.

Procedure - Data were obtained from horse owners or trainers via a web-based survey, although individuals not comfortable with this format were provided a printed survey, which was then entered into the web database.

Sample Population – 163 horses housed in 60 premises in MA, RI and CT; 100 horses with age ≥ 20 years and 63 horses with age < 20 years of age.

Results – Horses were divided into 4 groups according to their age: Group 1 (G1)- horses more than 25 years of age (n=48), Group 2 (G2) – horses 20 to 25 years of age (n=52), Group 3 (G3) – horses 15 to 19 years of age (n=17), and Group 4 (G4) – horses less than 15 years of age (n=46). QH was the predominate breed in most age groups. In G1, the most frequent breeds were 28% QH, 20% THB, 12% Pony breeds and 10% Morgan; in G2, there were 24% QH, 14% Pony breeds, 12% THB, 10% Morgan and 10% Warmblood; in G3, there were 24% QH, 22% Arabian, 18% Warmblood, 12% Standardbred and 6% Pony breeds; and in G4 there were 17% THB, 13% QH, 11% Warmblood, 11% Draft and 9% Pony. Hay, either alone or as a combination of grass hay and alfalfa hay, was the basis of the diet for most horses. Older horses were less likely to be fed round bales. Older horses were more likely to receive other types of forage (such as hay pellets, hay cubes or chopped hay) in addition to baled hay. Most horses (85% of G1, 75% of G2, 65% of G3 and 87% of G4) were allowed to graze. The number of months/ year, and hours per day of grazing did not vary amongst groups. Most horses (98% of G1, 87% of G2, 94% of G3 and 87% of G4) were fed some kind of pelleted feed or grain in addition to the forage. Most horses (83% of G1, 81% of G2, 82% of G3 and 70% of G4) received some kind of feed supplement regularly. The percentage of retired horses was greater for older groups; 75% (36/48) in G1, 23% (12/52) in G2, 11% (2/17) in G3, and 4% (2/46) in G4. Retired horses were not competing, but most were still exercised regularly, in addition to free exercise at turn out. The number of hours per day spent stalled and turned-out did not vary greatly amongst the age groups. For most horses, the time spent exercising included ridden in arena or trail, and lunged. The average number of hours of exercise per week was 20 to 25% less for the older group of horses. Older horses (i.e., G1) were more likely to have greater number of routine veterinary checks per year than younger age groups. Older horses (i.e., G1) were more likely to have routine dental checks or procedures performed at least every six months. Horses in G1 were less likely to be shod. Older horses were more likely to have hair coat shedding abnormalities or body clipping deemed necessary

(44% of G1, 27% of G2, 29% of G3 and 8% of G4). Body weight changes and eating issues were more likely in older horses. Older horses were more likely to have mobility issues. Colic and respiratory problems were also more likely in older age groups. Endocrine/ hormonal issues were less likely in the younger age group.

Conclusion – The nutritional care changed with the age of the horse. Most notably, older horses often received various types of forage in addition to baled hay, as compared to younger horses. Older horses had greater decline in their physical activities, nonetheless many of them remained active and useful despite their advanced age. Although older horses had greater health issues and veterinary medical requirements, owners appeared to be aware and able to provide the care necessary to their horses' age.

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