



hoofcare for the 'golden oldies'

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Good hoofcare needs to continue into a horse's twilight years. In fact, horses' hooves should be cared for properly from "the foaling yard to the grave". After all, they are standing on them 24/7!

Much like our aging human population, there are probably more old horses alive today than ever before. For horses, this is due largely to improvements in veterinary procedures, chemical wormers and specialist dentistry.

Hoofcare has also evolved in recent years with an increased understanding of physiologically correct hoof form and function, leading to horses staying sounder for longer.

Not only will good hoofcare likely extend a horse's life significantly - possibly many years - it will also lessen the degree of discomfort in those latter years.

One thing for certain, old age and retirement is definitely no excuse for neglect! (photo 1)



Hoofcare for older horses starts with keeping the toes short, both vertically and in terms of breakover length (photo 2). Long toes increase the amount of stress and degradation on the joints that are probably already suffering age related degradation.

There are about 20 bones in each leg and that means a lot of ageing joints!

Older horses often have a weaker bond through their lamellar line, resulting in a greater likelihood of separation and hoof infection. Trimming should include a significant rolling of the outer wall, with the roll continuing through to the laminar line wherever there is separation already present.

Seedy toe should be constantly managed. It is far better to stay right on top of it than let it get out of control. Every time a hoof is trimmed, the seedy toe situation should be assessed. Horse owners can be proactive by simply scooping out any small incursions of infection with a small loop knife whenever they see it (photo 3).

Thrush is another problem of older horses, due largely to their inactivity which means that paddock muck that gets pushed into the hooves stays there, creating a constantly anaerobic environment.

Be sure to regularly clean out the hooves to let some oxygen back in and also be proactive with a topical agent such as cider vinegar in a spray bottle (kids are good at this menial task if there are any around to help!).

Ideally, an older horse's living quarters should be set up to include an area of dry footing that they can stand on overnight. This will allow their hooves to air out.

Older horses, especially ponies, are likely to be suffering from metabolic disorders that directly affect the hooves, particularly low grade chronic laminitis which perpetuates lamellar separation.

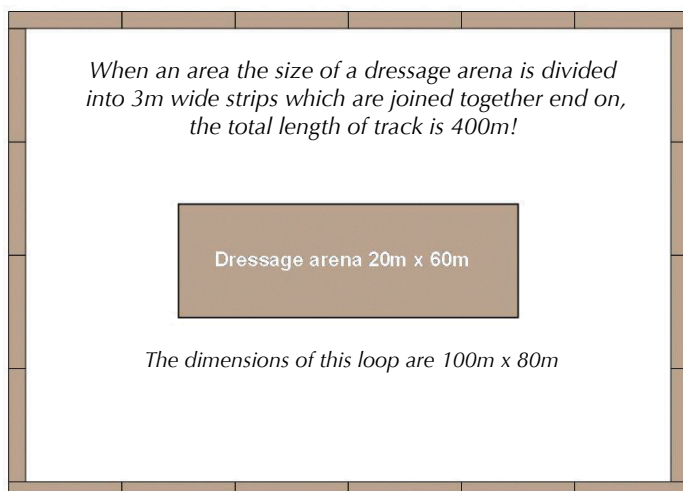
These horses often respond to dietary help with both the addition of a hind gut pH buffer and the limitation of unsuitable sugary grass.

Unfortunately the solution of 'locking them up' to restrict grass intake becomes problematic with older horses because there is near total removal of movement from their daily existence. There is no faster way to have an old horse seize up!

Horses are prairie animals and they need to move large distances every day to remain healthy, especially in their leg joints, and a great way around this contradiction is the concept of



Seedy Toe should be constantly managed



loop paddocks which keeps the total surface area the same, but changes the layout to an endless track so a horse regains the desire to move.

This simple analogy shows how an area that is only the size of a dressage arena can be reconfigured to create a significantly long track.

Loop paddocks can be very simply constructed with hot tape and tread-ins. This simple concept is often the single best thing that can be done to improve the lives of older 'metabolic' horses.

The reason often given for lack of regular hoofcare in older horses is the trauma arising from the stretching of stiff legs so a trimmer can get under them. It can be stressful for the horse, hard on the trimmer and some older horses can be uncomfortable for days after having their legs held up for trimming.

This problem can be overcome by a bit of forward planning and exercising and/or stretching the horse immediately before the trimmer arrives (be sure to check that the trimmer is on schedule or you may be doing a lot of work for nothing!).

In chronic cases that are beyond help with stretching, maybe consult your vet about using an anti-inflammatory for a couple of feeds prior to trimming.

If you get the trimmer regularly, the task is going to be a lot quicker, easier and kinder to an old horse, whereas neglectful hoofcare means a much longer operation and just compounds the problem as time goes on.

If you are not already doing your own maintenance trimming, maybe you can learn how to at least maintain your older horse's hooves so you can just keep the toes shorter between trimmer visits. You will be amazed at how effective maintenance trimming is for older horses (a simple touch up trim every 2 weeks).



Farrier stance - horse braced

Non farrier stance - horse more comfortable

If you are just trimming the toes, you will not need to put the horse's leg into the farrier stance, rather hold it steady in a position that the horse is comfortable with.

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Old sore knees need delicate treatment



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The secret is to stay relaxed so you are able to feel the horse's limit of comfortable stretch. If you are braced, you will not feel this.

If you are doing a full trim on an older horse with stiff legs, a low hoof stand should be used (photo 6).

On a front leg the shoulder and knee are often stiff, so a hoof stand can be placed right underneath the horse's body to avoid needing to pull the leg away from the body (photo 6).

If the hoof is resting on a sling top, the trimmer does not need to pull the leg out from the body to put it between their legs in the farrier stance.

If there is significant stiffness in the knee, the hoof may need to be held only just off the ground (photo 8).

On hind legs, the hoof needs to be kept quite low (photo 9).

This position is very hard on the trimmer, but made considerably easier by getting the horse to weight bear on a sling top.

If your older horse is suffering from poor vision, be mindful to keep hands on, especially on the hinds so it doesn't get frightened.

On a closing note, please don't starve an older horse that is shut up for diet control, but keep low sugar hay constantly going through its system. Feed deprivation to the point of starvation is not only ignorantly cruel, but is probably the quickest way to shorten a horse's life.



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Thanks to 'Lucky' for being the perfect old horse model.