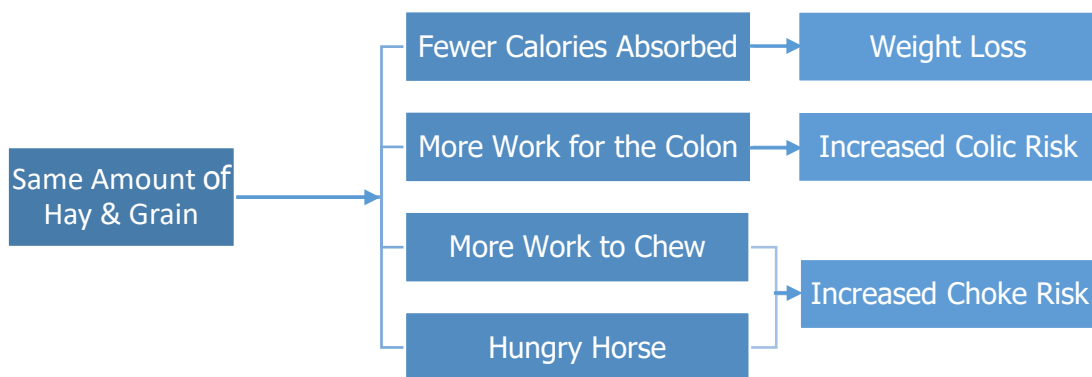


Feeding of Geriatric Horses

Dentition

- Generally speaking, the decision regarding how to feed an aging horse is based on their **teeth** not their chronological age.
(Age related diseases such as Cushing's Disease and secondary metabolic syndrome may be factors as well.)
- During routine dentistry, the veterinarian will at some point in the horses' life, report that dentition has reduced efficiency. A geriatric wave may have started, or some of the teeth may have started to "cup". This means that with the same amount of effort, the horse does not chew the fibers as hay into as small fibers as they did in their younger day



- Increased risk of colic and choke become significant when more than 50% of the hay fibers are >1.2 cm in length.
- The older horse still needs the same amount of hay, but cannot chew it. Replace some hay on an equal weight basis with hay pellets (ideally of the same kind of hay they are already eating), soaked into an oatmeal like mash (5-10 minutes) until fecal consistency/fiber length is appropriate.

Make all feed changes gradually. Use hay pellets similar to current hay.

Example - 22-year-old horse, usually an easy keeper with a good appetite.

- Horse has recently lost some weight. Mouth now has geriatric wave with cupping, and feces have longer fiber lengths
- Current Diet: 16 lbs. timothy hay per day and a ration balancer.
 - 1 flake of hay is approximately 4 lbs.; horse has been getting 2 flakes am and pm.
- Transition to New Diet:
 - 1.5 flakes timothy hay am and pm, 2 lbs. timothy pellet mash am/pm plus ration balancer for 1 week
 - Then 1 flake hay am/pm, 4lbs pellet mash am/pm. Assess fecal material after 1 week, determine if <50% fecal fibers are >1.2cm.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. What about senior feed?

Senior feeds are a complete feed which you could theoretically use to replace hay AND grain. They should be used when your horse will not eat enough hay pellets to maintain an appropriate amount of weight. Hay pellets are bland and boring. One of the most common diets for older horses is 50/50 hay pellets/senior feed. While you could feed a horse only senior, they tend to have more gas and GI upset, particularly if they cannot feed multiple small meals/day.

2. What about hay cubes?

The fibers are too big for horses with poor dentition to effectively chew. This is an inappropriate choice for senior horses.

3. What about beet pulp?

Beet pulp is a highly caloric, lower sugar, easily digestible healthy fiber feed. It is not a complete feed. It can be added if desired, but not as the main source of calories.

4. How many times a day should I feed my horse?

A minimum of 3x when on pelleted feed. Pelleted feed is moved out of the horse's stomach faster than hay/forage, and if fed only twice daily, horse will have a significantly increased risk of gastric ulceration.

5. Can I put my insulin resistant horse on pelleted feed only since low starch pellets are easier to buy than low starch hay?

Pelleted diets increase the horses' insulin spike after eating more than hay, so if your horse is insulin resistant, please consult on appropriate feeds, and consider recheck blood work after the switch is made. Insulin resistant horses may need to be fed more frequently than 3x per day if they are on pelleted feeds. Some low starch hay should be given if possible.

6. Can my geriatric horse on pelleted feed eat grass?

Yes- this is almost always safe as it is much softer than hay. It is NOT safe if the horse is insulin resistant however.

7. My horse eats 50:50 senior and hay pellets. Do they need vitamins?

If the horse (1000 lbs.) gets at least 6 lbs. of good quality senior they do not need extra vitamins/minerals.