

Old horses need extra-special care

A horse is a horse, of course, but as they age their requirements for care start to increase.

Biosecurity Queensland Principal Biosecurity Officer Fiona Thompson said it is not uncommon now for horses to live into their late twenties or even thirties. Therefore, it is important that owners understand some of their basic needs.

"Owners can give their older horse the quality of life it deserves by focusing on its health," she said.

"The digestive system of aging horses becomes less efficient, which can affect the way they digest, absorb and utilise their food. Therefore, they require higher energy in their food.

"It is best to provide older horses with a complete, highly digestible feed. This can be wet down to make it easier for them to chew and swallow. Aged horses can lose condition quickly and it is often difficult to regain that lost weight, so ensure that you are feeding your geriatric friend correctly."

Dr Thompson said animal welfare authorities receive many complaints about horses that are thin or in poor condition; however, some loss of condition in older horses occurs naturally.

"Loss of condition in older horses can be put down to several factors, including that these horses are not being worked and so lose muscle tone," she said. It can also be due to a reduced ability to chew, swallow or digest the food it is given. However, having a very thin horse probably means there are underlying reasons that need to be attended to. Some older horses can look thin but this doesn't necessarily mean they are malnourished."

Dr Thompson said that as horses age their teeth also deteriorate.

"Worn or lost teeth will affect the way horses graze and chew," she said. "Watch your older horse when it is eating to see if it is 'quidding' or dropping food, or salivating when eating. This may mean that it has dental problems, and you should ask your vet to examine your horse's teeth and general condition. Regardless of problems, older horses should have regular dental checks every six months with your vet."

Dr Thompson said that while the needs of horses change as they age, one requirement for owners remains the same.

"Even if your horse is old and no longer leaves your property, it is still important to register your property with Biosecurity Queensland," she said. "Registration results in a property identification code being issued for the horse property. Property registration is important so Biosecurity Queensland knows where horses are located in the event of an emergency or disaster situation."

"Areas with an increased density of horses may need to be dealt with differently than areas with very few horses at times of disease outbreak. Knowing the concentration of horses in certain areas can also assist in the development of effective disease response strategies."

