

VET DIARY

Golden oldies

Older horses are living longer, active lives, says our vet columnist Nicola Thompson, who shares how she cares for her own veteran equines

Coming into winter, many of my clients book me to carry out a yearly MOT on their older equines.

One of my favourite phrases, which I have heard in relation to elderly ponies, dogs and cats, is "age is not a disease" – this is something I totally agree with.

Older horses can be perfectly healthy and happy. That said, as they age a different set of concerns can arise and regular checks are a good idea.

This topic is particularly close to my heart as my family have two elderly ponies – Simon, who still has a mischievous streak despite being 27, and Bella, who is 22 but when I hack her out jogs rather than walks!

Age old conditions

An age-related problem I have personal experience of is arthritis. Bella has developed this in several joints and has had episodes of lameness due to it.

She gets stiff if kept inside for long periods and can't be as active as she used to be, although she still thinks she's a cross-country machine!

I manage her with pain relief and keep her active with regular turnout.

Lots of horses that have arthritis are still in normal work but some of my elderly patients are happily retired or in light work, with occasional pain relief when needed.

One of Simon's problems is his teeth – his incisors are very worn.

This problem is often seen in older horses like Simon, but can also occur in younger equines who are windsuckers and crib-biters.

This means he struggles to eat short grass and it takes him a long time to pull hay out of a net.

Lots of elderly ponies struggle to eat hay. This is because, as they age, their teeth become less effective.

Horses' teeth continue to erupt out of their gums throughout their life and they get worn down by chewing.

When they are older, their teeth can become loose, as tooth roots are shorter or there are larger gaps between teeth.



I check both of my horses regularly, to help keep their mouths healthy and spot signs of a problem early.

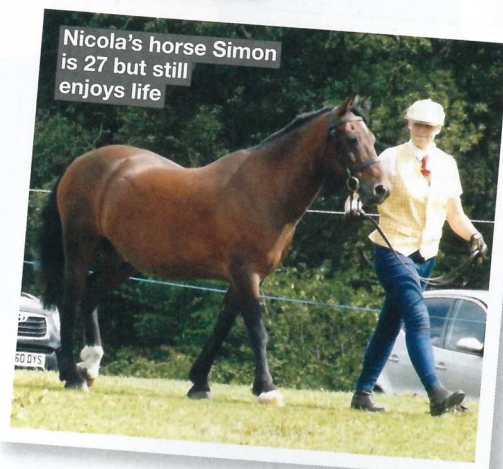
You should book a vet or a qualified equine dental technician (you can find a list at www.baedt.com) to check your own horse's teeth.

If Simon starts struggling to eat hay from the floor, I will have to start him on a specialist forage replacer. But for now, he maintains his weight well on grass supplemented with hay.



OUR EXPERT

Nicola Thompson is a qualified vet who works for Wright & Moreton in Cheshire, a member practice of XL Equine. She has ridden since she was a child.



Cushing's disease

Another disease which is seen in older horses is Cushing's – now more commonly referred to as Pituitary Pars Intermediary Dysfunction (PPID).

Signs of Cushing's include the classic curly coat and weight loss but also fat above the eyes and an increased risk of laminitis and infections.

Testing for the condition is easy and many horses and ponies get a new lease of life once they start on medication.

Cushing's is much more common in horses in their teens onwards but can occur in younger horses.

Neither Simon nor Bella has Cushing's but a lot of my patients do and it's very rewarding when treatment helps them stay active.

So, more and more of the horses in this country are living longer and keeping active for longer.

Some of this is thanks to better understanding of their veterinary needs and ways to keep them healthy. It's also due to better care from owners.

I love to see a horse happy and healthy at a good age, and it's a rewarding part of my job to give these patients the extra TLC required to help them continue this way for years to come. ■

NEXT ISSUE In next month's column, Nicola discusses back pain and kissing spine.