

# FEEDING THE SENIOR OTT

BY DR. NERIDA MCGILCHRIST



# INTRODUCTION

As I sat down to write the words for the QOTT video and eBook about feeding senior OTTs I pondered which words I would use to describe where old horses fit in our lives. There were really only two words for me... special and love.

Whether you've had your senior horse since they were a youngster, or they have entered your life and heart as an already old horse, these beautiful old souls carry with them a specialness that comes with their age, and for that, we love them dearly.

And because of that, we want to make sure they live for as long as possible and stay as healthy, happy, bright and mobile as they can into their twilight years.

Regular veterinary, dental and farrier care and lots of attention are critical in achieving positive health outcomes for your oldies... but nutrition underpins their health! And can make or break whether they are thriving or just surviving.

Ensuring they are able to consume enough fibre, feeding a balanced diet that meets all their nutrient requirements AND making sure they can maintain excellent gut health and digest their feed are some of the most important nutrition considerations when feeding aged horses.

Let's look at each of these aspects of feeding your senior OTT in detail.



Nerida

xx



# FEEDING THE SENIOR OTT

## WHEN IS AN OTT CONSIDERED 'SENIOR'

First, let's quickly look at when a horse is considered 'senior' and therefore when you should start to be more mindful of feeding them like a senior horse.

There is no 'magic age' when a horse becomes old. Some horses will seem old in their mid to late teens. Others will be thriving well into their mid-twenties.

Let your horse tell you when they need extra nutritional attention due to their age.

When they are 'old', you will start to notice things like they need a little bit more feed to hold their weight. Or they lose more weight, or lose it a bit faster, during winter.

They may become fussier, eat more slowly, drop feed when eating or are moved further down the pecking order. Or you might notice they don't seem to be able to chew hay or pasture properly.

Your vet and dentist may also pick up changes occurring that indicate your OTT is aging.

On noticing your OTT aging, you need to start to pay just that little bit more attention to their care and feeding.



# FOCUS ON FORAGE

Without doubt, the biggest issue I see old horses struggling with nutritionally is weight. Weight loss or inability to hold their weight is common.

And again, without doubt, the single most common contributing factor to this weight loss is an inability to eat, chew or digest enough forage.

Which then dramatically reduces the amount of energy (or calories) in their diet. And this reduced energy intake then results in visible weight loss or a seeming inability to gain weight.

Let's break down the ways forage intake or digestion might be reduced...

## 1. Inability to eat forage

First we have an inability to eat forage. As horses age, changes to their mobility as well as their incisors or 'front teeth' might physically restrict forage intake.

If they can't walk easily or if they find the head-down grazing position uncomfortable, they won't be able to physically get to or consume enough pasture.

OR if their incisors get worn, broken or painful, their ability to cut pasture off so they can get it into their mouth to chew is either reduced or disappears, again limiting their ability to consume pasture.

## 2. Inability to chew forage

The next factor limiting forage intake is an inability to chew forage. This happens when their molars or back teeth wear out or become painful.

Because of the highly abrasive nature of their normal diet and the wearing effect this has on their teeth, a horse's teeth grow or 'erupt' constantly throughout their life.

But when they get old, they essentially run out of 'tooth'... they don't have any more tooth to grow, meaning they have only got what they have got left, for the rest of their life.

As the last bit of their teeth wear away and cup out or break or have to be removed, your old horse will start to lose their ability to chew forage. And eventually, they may lose the ability to chew and swallow long-stem forage altogether.

A tell-tale sign of this occurring is finding 'quids'...sucked on, slobbery balls or clumps of pasture or hay.



Images of 'quids'

Image credit: Pat Harris



### 3. Inability to digest forage

Finally, an inability to fully digest forage may occur.

As horses age, it is thought that they lose some digestion and/or absorption capacity in the small intestine and hindgut, meaning they will extract less protein and energy from their forages.

And, as their ability to chew is gradually reduced, the particle size of the feed they swallow will slowly increase. And increasing particle size results in less digestion.

ADD all these factors together, and your beautiful oldies can end up in a situation where they are eating less forage, chewing and swallowing less forage and digesting what they do swallow less... which is the perfect recipe for reduced energy intake and weight loss!

The solution?



#### KEEP UP WITH DENTAL HEALTH!!

I want to mention quickly here, regular veterinary dental health checks are critical for older horses. Regular 6 monthly checks are advisable to pick up dental issues that will cause problems with grazing or chewing.

In addition, if you notice any kind of weight loss or change in appetite or behaviour, get their teeth checked. Poor dental health results in the sad loss of many senior horses, so be vigilant and have them checked regularly!

## FEED FORAGES THEY CAN EASILY EAT, CHEW AND DIGEST!

Pasture and traditional long-stem hay may eventually become unsuitable for your senior OTT as a source of nutrition because they simply can't consume and chew them well enough to be swallowed and properly digested.

So you need to get a bit creative with how you are going to get enough forage into your seniors.

Alternate forage options you can use include:

- Short chopped chaff
- Hay pellets, that may or may not need to be soaked
- Soaked hay cubes; or
- Hard feeds that are based predominantly on forages



Short chopped chaff



Hay pellets



Soaked hay cubes



Hard feeds



# BE MINDFUL OF FORAGE QUANTITY

It is really easy to underestimate how much additional forage you need to feed senior horses to maintain their energy intake. And not feeding enough will also lead to weight loss.

Horses do best when they are eating a minimum of 1.5% of their bodyweight in forage per day.

**If your senior horse has zero ability to eat normal pasture or hay, this means you will need to feed a minimum of 7.5 kg/day of alternate forages to an average sized, 500 kg OTT.**

To achieve 7.5 kg of alternate forage per day, you might use 1 kg of lucerne chaff, 1 kg of cereal hay (white) chaff, 1.5 kg of hay pellets, 2 kg of hay cubes and 2 kg of forage-based hard feed!



It is important that you initially weigh the forage for your senior OTT to make sure you aren't short-changing them on the most important part of their diet!

**If your senior has a reduced ability to eat forage, but still manages to eat some pasture or hay, you will need to work out how much additional alternate forage they need in their diet.**

You can do this by first introducing and then increasing the amount you are feeding until you find the sweet spot where your OTT is getting enough additional forage, alongside their hard feed, to hold their weight.

And that gives us our segue onto the next principle of feeding older horses, which is... feed a balanced diet.



# FEED A BALANCED DIET

While lack of forage is often what brings an old horse undone from a weight perspective, the balance of the remainder of the diet is also critically important.

For our senior OTTs, it is essential to balance their forages with additional energy, when required for them to maintain weight, as well as high quality protein and all the vitamins and minerals they need.

Properly balancing the diet means aged horses have all the nutrients they need to maintain bodyweight, hoof health, immune function, wound healing, joint function, muscle mass, movement and physical energy levels to help them stay as bright and sparky as they can be.

## Energy

Like all horses, your senior OTT's diet should be forage-based, as we have just discussed.

However, more often than not, your senior will need higher energy 'hard feed' to help meet their daily energy requirements so they can hold their weight.

Suitable, high-energy feed ingredients for older OTTs include:

- Digestible complete feeds, which may include extruded grain or high-energy fibre-based feeds.
- Extruded grains
- Australian stabilised rice bran
- High energy fibres, including sugarbeet pulp, lupin hulls and copra meal; and
- Oils, with flaxseed oil being the best choice due to its high omega 3 content

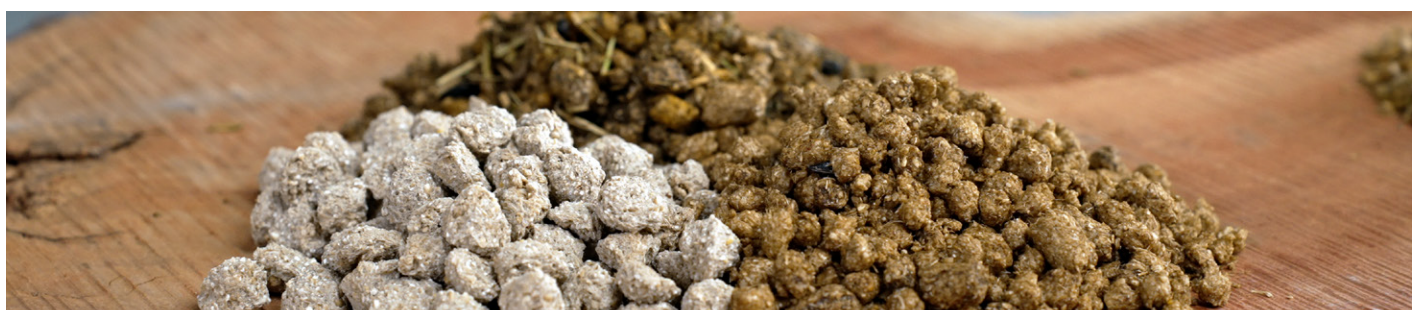
If you are feeding grains, it is really important not to overfeed grains to older OTTs. I would suggest a maximum of 3 kg of grain or grain-based feed per day for an average sized, 500 kg senior OTT who is no longer in work.

If your OTT needs more energy, first double check you are feeding enough forage, and then add high energy fibres or oil to add additional energy to the diet.

You should also consider adding digestive enzymes to help them properly digest their grains. More on this on page 10.

Do be mindful if your OTT has any hint of grain intolerance, metabolic syndrome, insulin resistance or diseases like PPID (which used to be called Cushing's disease) and laminitis, they should not have any grain in their diet at all.

If your oldie does have any of these conditions it is best to seek out nutrition advice from an experienced and qualified equine nutritionist or use an online nutrition calculator to design a safe, low starch, low sugar diet for them.





FEED A BALANCED DIET (CONT..)

Protein

Older horses sometimes need additional high-quality protein to maintain muscle mass and hoof quality and even to grow their long and often shaggy winter coats!

Additional protein may be particularly important if they are grazing low-quality, low-protein, mature grass pastures.

Suitable high-quality proteins for senior OTTs include:

- Prime quality lucerne hay or chaff
- Extruded full fat soybean
- Extruded lupins; and
- Complete feeds with quality protein from soybean

Vitamins and minerals

Vitamins and minerals are critical for health, and never more so for our old horses!

Without proper vitamin and mineral support, their hooves will fall apart, their immune system won't function properly, leaving them at high risk of succumbing to disease, they won't maintain muscle mass, basic functions like control of blood glucose and insulin can become impaired, physical energy levels will dwindle and their quality of life becomes poor.

So, you MUST fully meet their vitamin and mineral requirements. There are a few simple ways you can do this. Either:

1. Feed a complete feed that is designed for old horses
2. Feed a high-quality balancer pellet; or
3. Feed a high-quality vitamin & mineral supplement

It is important to feed complete feeds, balancer pellets, and vitamin and mineral supplements at the recommended feeding rate.

Here are some balanced diets you can use as a starting point for your beautiful senior OTT.

*Note that all diets given in this e-Book are intended as starting points for your OTT. They are all based on an average sized OTT of 500 kg bodyweight and use feeds, balancer pellets and supplements from QOTT partners.*

Scenario 1 – Seniors with reduced ability to eat pasture or hay (ie. some useful teeth)

Suitable for senior horses who are struggling to maintain their weight or who are still in light work.

Diet Option 1 – Complete Feed

2 - 3 kg/day	Complete Feed (Pryde's OldTimer or Pryde's EasiConditioner)
120 ml/day	Flaxseed oil/Canola oil
0.5 - 1 kg/day	Lucerne chaff
0.5 - 1 kg/day	Cereal chaff
0.5 - 1 kg/day	Hay pellets
2 kg/day	Lucerne hay
24/7 access	Pasture and/or multiple types of grassy hay
Free Choice	Salt

Suitable for senior horses who are still able to maintain their weight well on a largely forage based diet

Diet Option 2 – Balancer Pellet

1 kg/day	Balancer Pellet (Pryde's Premium 250)
0 - 2 kg/day	Any combination of sugarbeet pulp, lupin hulls, copra meal, extruded barley or Australian stabilised rice bran
120 ml/day	Flaxseed oil/Canola oil
0.5 - 1 kg/day	Lucerne chaff
0.5 - 1 kg/day	Cereal chaff
0.5 - 1 kg/day	Hay pellets
2 kg/day	Lucerne hay
24/7 access	Pasture and/or multiple types of grassy hay
Free Choice	Salt



FEED A BALANCED DIET (CONT..)

Suitable for senior horses who are still able to easily maintain their weight well on a largely forage based diet

Diet Option 3 – Vitamin & Mineral Supplement

60 g/day	<b>Vitamin &amp; mineral supplement</b> (Poseidon Digestive VM)
300 g/day	<b>Full fat soybean</b> (Pryde's Protein Pak)
0 - 2 kg/day	<b>Any combination of sugarbeet pulp, lupin hulls, copra meal, extruded barley or Australian stabilised rice bran</b>
120 ml/day	<b>Flaxseed oil/Canola oil</b>
0.5 - 1 kg/day	<b>Lucerne chaff</b>
0.5 - 1 kg/day	<b>Cereal chaff</b>
0.5 - 1 kg/day	<b>Hay pellets</b>
2 kg/day	<b>Soaked lucerne hay</b>
24/7 access	<b>Pasture and/or multiple types of grassy hay</b>
Free Choice	<b>Salt</b>

Suitable for senior horses who are still able to maintain their weight well on a largely forage based diet

Diet Option 2 – Balancer Pellet

1 kg/day	<b>Balancer Pellet</b> (Pryde's Premium 250)
1 - 2.5 kg/day	<b>Any combination of sugarbeet pulp, lupin hulls, copra meal, extruded barley or Australian stabilised rice bran</b>
120 ml/day	<b>Flaxseed oil/Canola oil</b>
2 - 3 kg/day	<b>Lucerne chaff</b>
2 - 3 kg/day	<b>Cereal chaff</b>
2 - 3 kg/day	<b>Hay pellets</b>
2 kg/day	<b>Soaked hay cubes</b>
24/7 access	<b>Pasture and/or hay to still allow chewing and saliva production</b>
Free Choice	<b>Salt</b>

Scenario 2 – Seniors with zero ability to eat pasture or hay (ie. no useful teeth)

Suitable for senior horses who are struggling to maintain their weight or who are still in light work.

Diet Option 1 – Complete Feed

2.5 to 3.5 kg/day	<b>Complete Feed</b> (Pryde's OldTimer or Pryde's EasiConditioner)
120 ml/day	<b>Flaxseed oil/Canola oil</b>
2 - 3 kg/day	<b>Lucerne chaff</b>
2 - 3 kg/day	<b>Cereal chaff</b>
2 - 3 kg/day	<b>Hay pellets</b>
2 kg/day	<b>Soaked hay cubes</b>
24/7 access	<b>Pasture and/or hay to still allow chewing and saliva production</b>
Free Choice	<b>Salt</b>

Suitable for senior horses who are still able to easily maintain their weight well on a largely forage based diet

Diet Option 3 – Vitamin & Mineral Supplement

60 g/day	<b>Vitamin &amp; mineral supplement</b> (Poseidon Digestive VM)
300 g/day	<b>Full fat soybean</b> (Pryde's Protein Pak)
0 - 2 kg/day	<b>Any combination of sugarbeet pulp, lupin hulls, copra meal, extruded barley or Australian stabilised rice bran</b>
120 ml/day	<b>Flaxseed oil/Canola oil</b>
2 - 3 kg/day	<b>Lucerne chaff</b>
2 - 3 kg/day	<b>Cereal chaff</b>
2 - 3 kg/day	<b>Hay pellets</b>
2 kg/day	<b>Soaked hay cubes</b>
24/7 access	<b>Pasture and/or hay to still allow chewing and saliva production</b>
Free Choice	<b>Salt</b>

# BE MINDFUL OF GUT HEALTH AND DIGESTION EFFICIENCY

With age come some challenges for maintaining gut health and digestion efficiency. Top priorities when it comes to gut health and digestion efficiency for senior OTTs are:

1. **Feed lots of forage!** I say this so often, and it is because it is **the MOST important aspect of horse nutrition, including for older horses.** Lots for an old horse is free access to pasture if they are still able to effectively graze or an absolute minimum of 7.5 kg/day of alternate forages for an average sized 500 kg OTT.

2. Feed a big variety of forage and other fibres. The more forage and fibre diversity you can create in the diet, the more microbial diversity your OTT will maintain in their hindgut as they age. And this gives them better protection from disease, including a reduced risk of colic. PLUS it should also help them to digest their feed more effectively.

To achieve fibre variety, allow your OTT to graze on mixed species pastures and/or feed multiple different types of hay and also use alternate fibres like sugarbeet pulp, lupin hulls and copra meal in their hard feeds.

3. Make sure they have constant access to forage, even if they can't actually eat it. Horses are driven to eat and chew, so your senior OTTs will still 'chew' on pasture or hay, even if they can't actually chew it up. It is important to allow them to do this for their mental health. AND it means they will still be salivating and providing the all-important flow of saliva into their stomach which will reduce their risk of gastric ulceration!

4. Help them digest their feed with digestive enzymes. Older horses may lose their capacity to digest grains because the concentration of the starch digesting enzymes (the little scissors in the small intestine that cut starch up so it can be absorbed... watch Video 1 'Knowing Your OTT Inside Out' in this QOTT nutrition series for more details) drops... almost to the point where it would be like asking you to cut up an entire sheet of paper into little squares, but only giving you a pair of scissors for intermittent 5 second periods to do it. It is very hard to 'digest feed' when you don't have enough tools to achieve the task!

So adding enzymes to your oldie's feed to help them digest starch helps. And it gives your senior OTT two big benefits. First, it helps them extract maximum nutrition from any well-cooked grains you may be feeding. And second, it keeps starch out of the hindgut so the hindgut microbe population stays strong and healthy.

**Hint:** If weight loss is an issue for your senior OTT, despite feeding plenty of forage, try adding Poseidon's Digestive EQ to their hard feed if it contains grain or a grain based complete feed. The enzymes in Digestive EQ will help them to properly digest their feed and hopefully help them gain weight.

## A FEW EXTRA LITTLE THINGS

Here are a few extra little things to keep your gorgeous oldie in tip-top shape:

- Keep them moving – the more they can move the naturally fitter and stronger they will stay. Keep them in big paddocks with their best buddies and, where possible, keep them in light work for as long as they are happy to participate.

- Rug them in winter. A rug reduces their maintenance energy requirement for maintaining body warmth and helps them maintain weight in the colder months. Just make sure you are regularly taking that rug off to check body condition!
- Use flaxseed oil or fish oil supplements in their diet for the omega 3 anti-inflammatory effect; and finally
- Make sure their feed bin is at a comfortable height for them so they are comfortable while eating and pain doesn't affect their appetite.

## THE IMPORTANT BITS

To recap the most important things to remember when feeding your senior OTT:

- 1. Weight loss or inability to gain weight is often a senior OTT's biggest struggle.**
- 2. A reduced ability to eat, chew or digest forage are the most common contributing factors to weight loss.**
- 3. The loss of teeth or pain while chewing is the most common cause of old horses losing the ability to properly eat and chew forage.**
- 4. Regular dental health checks are absolutely essential! And immediately have their mouth checked if you notice unexpected weight loss!**
- 5. If your old horse has zero ability to eat forage, you need to feed a minimum of 1.5% of bodyweight, or 7.5 kg/day for an average sized 500 kg OTT of forage as chaff, hay pellets, hay cubes or forage based hard feed.**
- 6. If your oldie has a reduced ability to eat forage, you will need to introduce some of these easy to eat forages and keep increasing the amount until you find the amount they need to hold weight.**
- 7. Be sure to feed a balanced diet that meets their requirements for energy, protein, vitamins and minerals.**
- 8. If you are feeding grains, make sure they are digestible, limit the amount to no more than 3 kg/day for an average sized 500 kg OTT and feed enzymes to help them digest their grains properly.**
- 9. And finally, do what you can to help support their gut health. Feed lots of forage, feed a big variety of forage and alternate fibres, and make sure they have constant access to forage, even if they can't properly eat it. Just the mental stimulation of having it available and pseudo-chewing it keeps their mind happy and their gut healthy.**

Our senior OTTs are some of the most special horses that walk the earth and I know anyone who owns one, especially one that has been a part of the family for a long time, will want to take the very best care of them.

Use the feeding and nutrition advice given here to get their nutrition right! And this, along with careful dental and veterinary care, will keep them as healthy, mobile, cheeky and happy as they can be, well into their senior years!







ENJOY THE  
JOURNEY