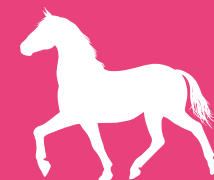


AGE IS ONLY A NUMBER

by Seadown Equine Vets



DID you know that the average age of horses in the UK is approximately 13 years?

With an estimated horse population in this country of approximately 847,000, it suggests many are living to a ripe old age. It's something that we also see here at Seadown Equine Practice, where an interest in equine geriatric medicine is on the rise.

Whilst horses are typically classed as veterans at 15 years, many continue to enjoy active and healthy lives, competing or simply hacking.

The lifespans of both humans and horses have greatly increased with the progress in medicine, giving many owners the ability to successfully manage their older horses wellbeing and let them enjoy their active lives.

The veteran showing classes are testament to this. Not only are these classes hugely popular but watching the beautiful condition and free movement of entrants, it's impossible to believe that they are two decades old, sometimes much more.

Better understanding of the aging process and associated diet and management requirements have helped horses live longer.

Karolina Kalka, equine vet at Seadown (pictured top), said: "It's not just the need to conduct more frequent dental check-ups or test for Cushing's disease – as vets we also seek to preserve the fitness of the horse, so it can enjoy the last decade of its life to the fullest extent."

"At Seadown we recognise how important it is to address an older equine's needs with sensitivity and to meet the expectations of their owners. We all dread the inevitable day we have to say a final farewell."

The average lifespan of a domestic horse is now 20-30 years old but many horses go well beyond this average. Ponies tend to live longer, with many ponies still serving as schoolmasters well into their 30s.

During this period, of course, it's sensible to consider all aspects of an older horse's management regime, like reducing workload and a modified diet. Of course, horses will be horses and accidents will continue to happen but, with care, these need not mean retirement.



Take little Kowtow, for example – a pretty Welsh section A, purchased when 11 years old as a lead rein pony for young Felicity (pictured inset above).

Kowtow's owners had few expectations but Kowtow and Felicity forged the most wonderful of partnerships and have been inseparable for over 10 years.

Felicity's mum Suzanne said: "They progressed to do more than we ever thought possible: dressage, showing classes, as well as the rides out in the New Forest. It was a dream seeing them both so happy together."

However, one day Kowtow fell ill, as Karolina explained: "I had known Kowtow for some time already, and could see straight away that he was not himself during the appointment at the clinic."

"A pelvic scan revealed that Kowtow sustained an iliac wing fracture, suspected by my colleague Breda during initial evaluation."

"Thankfully, the injury was non-catastrophic and with the diagnosis made the day after an onset of swelling, we could introduce a rehabilitation plan straight away."

"Early diagnosis prevented further propagation of the fracture line which could have potentially led to permanent incapability to ride or even put the pony's life at risk."

"Rapid reaction of the experienced owners and the care and love they showed Kowtow during his convalescence, played a crucial part in this success story."

What of the odds of two successive injuries for an older horse? An excellent example is another of Seadown's special older patients is 23-year-old Summer Day, a beautiful Anglo Arab.

Summer Day has been everything owner Lindsey Templeman hoped for – they had competed successfully at unaffiliated dressage, riding club dressage qualifiers, qualifying once for the nationals, plus show jumping.

Their greatest love however has been exploring the trails in the New Forest and having a good gallop!

Summer Day had been

relatively injury free until one morning last year when the first major accident occurred. For some reason, best known to Summer Day, she jumped over the back of a tractor with a trailer attached whilst in the field, resulting in serious injury to the stifle joint.

Karolina explained: "The improvement after an acute trauma to the lateral patellar ligament and the list of other more or less severe problems affecting the right stifle of Summer Day was not satisfactory after the initial treatment with hyaluronic acid and steroids."

"In order to let the owner and her incredibly ambitious mare to go back to their usual trainings we decided to introduce polyacrylamide gel. This substance incorporates into the joint's constituents and increases the elasticity within the joint, as well as protecting from pain."

"The significant improvement could be seen in just four weeks. A very strict rehabilitation programme with a slow return to a normal level of work was undertaken."

"During the final re-evaluation, the movement pattern was better than expected and the horse with the owner could finally return to normal training routine for the first time in eight months!"

Then tragedy struck a second time with severe lameness in front – owner Lindsey could not believe it.

After an examination and ultrasound, Karolina was dismayed to see that she had some serious lesions in her suspensory ligament in her off fore.

Karolina said: "Bearing in mind age and the need to keep Summer Day quiet and relaxed, it was agreed she would be in a small paddock. Focal lesions that were found in the body of suspensory ligament in the forelimb required medical treatment."

"Unfortunately, two lots of stem cells collected from the equine umbilical cords (new product released just recently)

were sent, and both packages had gone over the required temperature and were of no use!

"The political chaos after Brexit affected even the branch of veterinary industry. Transport of this very precious biological material became impossible."

"The alternative treatment we opted for was IRAP (Interleukin-1 receptor antagonist protein). It is a trade name of a system used to obtain the mixture of multiple anti-inflammatory and regenerative proteins from the patient's blood."

"The ligament had healed remarkably well in what was only four months from injury, to the point of it being almost impossible to see that there had been any issue!"

Lindsey said: "Summer Day's recovery after two serious injuries, especially at her 23 years of age, is amazing. There are no guarantees of course, but having twice thought our riding partnership was over, to be back on and enjoying riding her again is just wonderful."

"I will be forever grateful for the care and dedication shown by Karolina, with the support of Seadown, to arrive at where we are now. I'm looking forward to a quiet hack out in our wonderful New Forest again."

It's worth reflecting on the lessons of these cases as a reminder that as horses age their bodies will inevitably change both externally and internally.

As a result, veteran horses will have different management and feeding requirements and may be susceptible to a range of health problems, rarely seen in younger animals.

However, as with all horses, it is always important for owners to remain vigilant, looking for uncharacteristic signs of distress, stiffness and lack of appetite.

There is no substitute for catching a problem early but with good management, love and care, there is every possibility that your veteran horse will be with you for many more happy years to come.