

Welfare, Quality of Life, and Euthanasia of Aged Horses



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KEYWORDS

• Geriatric • Human–horse bond • Old age • Grief • Welfare • Mortality

KEY POINTS

- The human–horse bond, strengthened by years of ownership, is strong in geriatric horses and affects owner decision-making about their horses' welfare, quality of life (QoL), and euthanasia.
- Mortality rates increase with increasing age in horses with the overall incidence of mortality in aged horses between 9 to 11 mortalities per 100 horse years at risk.
- Owners of geriatric horses want to maximize the welfare of their horses but may under-recognize clinical signs of disease or attribute them to senescence rather than disease.
- The gastrointestinal and musculoskeletal systems are the most commonly implicated as resulting in death or euthanasia; however, concurrent chronic disease has a major influence on horse owners' decision for euthanasia.
- QoL assessment could play an important role in informing euthanasia decisions. Veterinarians should be proactive in discussing QoL with owners.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between humans and horses is unique and powerful, with the development of a bond reinforced by years of interaction between owners and their aged horses.¹ Inevitably, owners of geriatric horses will be faced with deteriorating health of their animals as they advance in years. Although all horse owners want to maximize the welfare of their aged horses, owners of geriatric horses may not recognize clinical signs or appreciate their significance, or might mistakenly attribute them to old age.² Nonetheless, owners are often the best placed to determine the quality of life (QoL) of

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their own horses and, furthermore, are the ones faced with the decision for euthanasia in a horse with a compromised QoL.^{3,4} Such a decision is usually far from easy and can be a huge burden on owners, who often rely on advice from their veterinarian. The aim of this article is to outline the role of aged horses, define welfare and QoL of aged horses, and explore causes and experiences of mortality in aged horses.

THE ROLE OF AGED HORSES AND THE HUMAN–HORSE BOND

The role of horses in Western society has changed dramatically during the past century with the decline of the working horse and concurrent proliferation of the performance horse.⁵ Such performance activities include anything from recreational riding to racing disciplines. In Western countries, the predominant horse use is for recreation rather than commercial reasons. For example, in the United Kingdom, a recent survey of more than 15,000 horse owners found more than a third of horses were used for leisure and hacking, around a third used mainly for equestrianism (eventing, dressage, show jumping and showing), and a further 20% used for a variety of purposes from racing or breeding to hippotherapy.⁶

However, in the past few decades, even the role of horses as recreational performance animals has been challenged. In the United Kingdom, 12% of horses were not kept for performance and were unriden and/or companions.⁶ This supports survey-based research of almost 50,000 households across the United States where 38.4% of horse owners considered their horses to be family members, more than half (56.5%) considered their horses to be a pet or companion, with only 5.1% considering them to be property.⁷ In a Dutch survey of horse enthusiasts, 47% respondents indicated that horses were like a partner or child to them.⁸ Although these reports are not age-specific, demographic research has shown aged horses typically have similar roles. In survey research of horses 15 or more years of age, approximately 60% of the horses were used for leisure or hacking, whereas 30% to 40% of the horses were retired or kept as a companion.^{9,10}

This altered, noncommercial role of horses in Western societies has been reflected in the management of aged horses, in which owners of aged horses that are pets or companions, or even those used for recreation and leisure, have different influences and reasons for management decisions compared with those who keep their animals for commercial reasons. Surveys have shown that horses are being kept into their old age and into retirement; approximately 25% of the horse population is 15 years or older.¹⁰ Although some aspects of health care have been shown to be reduced following retirement, owners are interested in the health and welfare of their aged horses, and the ability to maintain the horses' QoL.¹¹ Owners of aged horses asked to record their perceptions of health issues they considered important in horses 15 or years or older volunteered welfare, management, and preventive care as important issues, as well as medical or health-related conditions. The most commonly reported were maintaining the horse's condition, arthritis or lameness, teeth or dental care, psychological health (horse "feels" cared for), exercise for health (including not excessive exercise), and protection from the environment (rugging, warmth, shelter).¹¹ The concern horse owners have for the health and welfare of their aged horses is also reflected in veterinary care, with geriatric horse admissions increasing steadily almost 6-fold from 2.2% of the total equine patient admissions to 12.5% over a 10-year period.¹²

The basis of the role change of horses is likely due to a combination of the relative affluence of many horse owners living in Western countries, as well as the unique and powerful relationship between humans and horses. Most aged horses have been in the owner's possession for more than 10 years,^{9,10} with years of interaction between

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