



Basic Horse Care: Nutrition

Proper nutrition is an everyday consideration of horse management and is essential to every horse engaged in any activity.

Did You Know? The horse's small intestine is 50 to 70 feet long and holds 10 to 23 gallons, whereas their stomachs hold only 2 to 4 gallons (www.myhorseuniversity.com/EE/September2012/Nutrition) The proper feeding of horses involves knowing the nutritional needs of the horse and providing for these needs through the provision of suitable feedstuffs. It is always a good idea to check with your veterinarian or an equine nutritionist if you have questions regarding the nutritional needs of your horse. Proper feeding of horses means attention to details. The horse's nutritional requirements are influenced by the following factors: size of the animal, the environment in which the horse is kept, the age of the horse, the type of use or activity, and individual metabolic needs and characteristics. It is important that horses be provided with feed regularly and that they have adequate access to clean, fresh water.

Hay is for Horses – Fill Them with Forage

Because the horse is a grazing animal, the basis for all horse diets should be forage - usually hay or pasture. Good-quality forage, along with water and salt can meet the maintenance requirements for many horses. Depending on forage quality some horses will not only maintain weight, but will gain weight when fed an all-forage diet. It is often desirable to allow horses free choice access to good quality forage, but if forage has to be restricted for some reason, horses should be given at least 1 to 1.5 lb of hay (or pasture equivalent) per 100 lb of body weight. Many horses will need other feed if forage intake is restricted to these levels.

Horses Drink A Lot

Water is an essential nutrient that is necessary for horses to maintain normal bodily function. Horses are best given water free-choice or they should be able to drink their fill at least twice a day. Most horses will drink 5 to 10 gallons of water per day with factors such as hot weather, exercise, and lactation causing a significant increase in water consumption. When horses are given inadequate access to water, they become dehydrated and become more susceptible to a variety of health problems, such as weight loss, colic, and kidney disease. Special attention should be paid to water sources in the winter to ensure that water is available.

Physical Activity and Concentrated Feeds

Physical activity, lactation and growth elevates nutrient requirements may necessitate the addition of concentrate to a forage-based feeding program. Also, horses that are unable to maintain body weight and condition on a forage-only diet may need concentrate. Although plain cereal grains (oats corn, barley) are good sources of calories, commercially manufactured horse feeds are more likely to meet all nutrient needs when fed according to the manufacturer's recommendations. Feeds formulated for other animals (cattle, sheep, etc.) should usually be avoided. As a general rule, the amount of concentrate should be divided into at least two feedings per day. The grain is used to supplement forage to provide the energy and other nutrients needed for faster weight gains, growth, increased milk production, and high levels of athletic activity.

Many states and professional organizations have written standards of care for horses.