



Sports Medicine, Lameness, Reproduction and Dentistry

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Feeding Horses: The Basics

There are dozens of commercial grains and feed supplements available for horses. In the midst of all the feed tags, labels, print ads, and suggestions from friends it is easy to get lost and lose sight of the goals for feeding your horse. The exact feed requirements vary on a horse to horse basis. Horses will require different amounts or types of feed based on some of the following criteria: age, activity level, metabolism, hay quality, dental ability, medical history, and many others.

Many of the major feed companies have web based feed suggestion programs. By going to the company's website and answering a few basic questions about your horse, the company will list examples of appropriate feeds for your horse. Your veterinarian is also a great resource in helping you design a feeding program for your individual horse. We have listed some basic guidelines and examples in this article. These are not hard fast rules, nor is it a complete index of all the feeds and feed combinations available to you for your horse.

Quick Facts

- The average horse needs to consume about 2% of its body weight in feed per day. The majority of that feed should be in the form of forage (hay and grass). Only a small percentage should be concentrate (grain).
- Every horse should have free choice water and a salt or mineral block available.
- Most horse feeds require that a horse eat at least 4 lbs per day to consume their daily requirements for vitamins, minerals, and micronutrients
- Every feed scoop is different; scales are a much more accurate way to determine how much feed your horse is receiving.
- Body Condition Scoring (BCS) should be used to determine the ideal weight of your horse. Weight tapes can help to reach a goal once you determine your horses' ideal BCS.
 - Examples of Body Condition Scoring are available through your veterinarian or through feed company's websites.
- Horses with Equine Metabolic Syndrome/Insulin Resistance or Cushing's Disease will require a more specialized diet low in NSC (Non-Structural Carbohydrates) or starches.
- Legumes (alfalfa and clover) are higher in digestible energy and should be fed with caution to obese horses. HYPP horses can also be very sensitive to these types of hay due to their potassium content.

Case Studies

- Remember, these are broad recommendations. Your veterinarian can help you tailor a plan specific to your horse's nutritional status and environment.

Weanling Quarter Horse (6 months of age), filly, BCS: 4/9

- Ideally, this filly would have been sharing some of her dam's grain prior to weaning. It is often easiest to place mares on mare and foal feed or growth feed prior to foaling so that it is safe for the foal to begin eating that feed as they mature.
- Foals and weanlings should be kept around a body condition score of 3-4 to ensure they are not placing unnecessary weight on growing bones and developing joints.
- Foals and weanlings require a higher protein level than older horses to allow for growth. They also require a 2:1 Calcium: Phosphorous ration to ensure healthy bone development.
- Feed requirements for weanlings should be based on the feed tag and their weight. A weight tape should be used every 2-3 weeks to closely track their weight changes in order to change feed amounts appropriately.
- Use a scale to accurately determine how much feed the weanling is receiving each and every feeding. Hanging fish scales attached to a bucket work very well for this purpose.
- A few examples of feed for this weanling filly:
 - Purina Brand Feeds
 - Ultium Growth, Omolene #300, Strategy GX, Equine Junior, Enrich 32
 - Nutrena Brand Feeds
 - Life Design Mare & Foal, Vitality Mare & Foal, SafeChoice
 - Buckeye Brand Feeds
 - Gro 'N Win, Growth (available in pellet, texturized, or sweet formulations)
 - Triple Crown Brand Feeds
 - Growth

15 yr old Quarter Horse Gelding, Diagnosed with Insulin Resistance (Metabolic Syndrome), BCS: 8/9

- It is very important to control the starch and carbohydrate levels in horses with Metabolic Syndrome and/or Insulin Resistance.
- This horse is also overweight, so limiting fat intake is also important. Remember every horse is different and diets are tailored to meet specific needs. Some insulin resistance horses require moderate to high amounts of fat in their diets.
- While being overweight, this horse still has daily requirements for micronutrients, vitamins, and minerals
- Ideally, feeds with a NSC value around 10 should be sought to try to maintain glucose levels.
- A scale should be used to ensure this horse is receiving appropriate amounts of feed to provide micronutrients, vitamins, and minerals.
- Grass hay and a good supplement may be a good solution for this particular "easy-keeper" with carb sensitivity.
- A few examples of feed include:
 - Purina Brand Feeds
 - Enrich 32, Enrich 12 (to be used with higher quality hay)

- Well Solve L/S
- Nutrena Brand Feeds
 - Empower Balance
 - Safe Choice
- Buckeye Brand Feeds
 - Gro N Win, Safe N Easy
- Triple Crown Brand Feeds
 - Triple Crown 30% Supplement, Triple Crown 12% Supplement, Triple Crown Safe Starch Forage
- Multivitamin/Mineral Supplement
 - Microvet (Boehringer-Ingelheim)

12 yr old, Thoroughbred Gelding, moderate work, BCS: 3/9

- This horse has a low body condition score and needs to gain some weight.
- Since the horse is in moderate work, we need to be able to add calories to his diet without making him more hyperactive.
- We need to be sure we do not add feeds with increased amounts of sugars and starches as they have the potential to make a horse more hyper. Increased amounts of sugar and starch can also lead to GI upset.
- Another important factor is the amount of feed that the horse has to eat in a day to gain weight. Feeds that are energy dense (more calories per mouthful) will require less to be fed per day.
- One of the most important parts of the feed tag for this type of horse is the fat content. Look for feeds with 10% fat to add the most weight in the shortest period of time.
- Examples
 - Purina Brand Feeds
 - Ultium Competition, Omolene 200, Omolene 500, Strategy GX, Equine Junior, Equine Senior, Amplify Supplement (added to the horse's current feed as a top-dress), Athlete Supplement
 - Nutrena Brand Feeds
 - XTN, Legacy, Life Design Compete, Triumph 10-10, Vitality Ultra, Empower Boost (added to the horse's current feed)
 - Buckeye Brand Feeds
 - Cadence, EQ8, Race N Win, Trifecta, Unbeatable, Prominent, Ultimate Finish (added to the horse's current feed)
 - Triple Crown Brand Feeds
 - Triple Crown 14% Performance, Triple Crown Complete, Triple Crown Rice Bran (added to the horse's current feed)

22 yr old, Quarter Horse Cross, Mare, good dental health, BCS: 5/9

- All Senior horses need Senior feed, right? Wrong. Senior feeds are very safe and easily digestible. They are not, however, very nutrient dense. Not all horses require senior feeds.
- It is often easier to feed a senior horse more of a performance feed to increase their weight (and improve their body condition score).

- Senior feeds are usually considered a complete feed meaning that they can be fed alone and will replace the need for hay in a horse's diet.
- Horses with poor dental health often do well on a senior feed because they can be dissolved with warm water into a gruel/mash form that is easier for the horse to consume.
- Horses that have had colic surgery are often transitioned back onto a Senior feed for a period of time prior to returning to their normal diet.
- Horses that have been starved often do well on a Senior feed as grain is re-introduced.
- Read the label of the Senior feed very carefully to ensure you give enough to meet your horse's nutritional needs. Since they are not as nutrient dense, many senior feeds require more to be fed per day. Be sure to weigh your horse's portions to ensure you are feeding the correct amount.
- Examples of Senior Feed
 - Purina Brand Feed
 - Equine Senior
 - Strategy, Enrich32, Equine Adult, Horse Chow#100, Omolene#100
 - Nutrena Brand Feed
 - Life Design Senior, Triumph Senior
 - Safe Choice, Life Design Compete
 - Buckeye Brand Feeds
 - Senior (available in: pelleted, GC, and texturized)
 - Gro N Win, Safe N Easy
 - Triple Crown Brand Feed
 - Triple Crown Senior
 - Triple Crown 10% Performance, Triple Crown Complete, Triple Crown Low Starch, Triple Crown Lite, Triple Crown 30% Pellet

Summary

- Your veterinarian is a great resource to help you formulate a feeding program for your horses
- Most feed stores have nutritional representatives that can also help you with feeding recommendations
- If your horse is overweight, remember to calculate their daily needs based on their IDEAL weight, not their current weight.
- Remember to weigh your horse's feed, that is the only way to ensure you are feeding the proper amount. Monitor snack intake closely. Sugar cubes and peppermints, etc are nice but they contain extra calories and extra starches.
- Read the feed tag and if you have questions about what it says, be sure to ask
- Don't forget the importance of exercise. Increased levels of exercise will boost metabolism, decrease blood glucose and insulin levels, and help your horse keep a healthy body condition. Use a weight tape every 2-3 weeks to monitor your horse's progress and to be sure you are feeding proper amounts of feed.
- Keep it simple; remember that not everything that is advertised needs to go into your horse's belly. Most grains are designed to be fed without supplements.