

Many horse owners struggle with how to feed their horses. Whether your horse needs to lose weight, gain it, or you are just worried about proper nutrition, it can be difficult to make sense of feed tags, supplement catalogs, and the vast array of information out there.

When it comes to assessing feeds, The important thing to remember is that the numbers on the tags are only meaningful IF you are feeding the amount of lbs recommended on the bag. Think of it like a bag of potato chips. It may say 100 calories per serving on the bag, but that is only meaningful if you realize a serving is only 10 chips. If you eat half the bag the 100 calories a serving does not really tell you much. The recommendations on the bag are generally quite high even for horses that need to gain weight ( bc too much grain can predispose to colic, ulcers, etc). In addition, the tag numbers are based on what the government agricultural departments decided ( in some cases many years ago) to put on feed tags. The numbers on the tags are rarely easily decoded by most people especially as different brands may use different scales ( for example some will give vitamins in ppm --that is parts per million--while others will give them in IU's--international units--it requires some significant math to compare the two). The good news is that by following a few simple guidelines it is hard to go wrong as all the major feed manufacturers produces high quality consistent feeds.

First , hay is the most important component of the horse's diet, Hay should make up at least 65% of the horse's diet and as much as 95 % if the horse is inactive or an easy keeper. Hays can vary widely in calorie levels. Usually alfalfa hays and third cutting hays are highest in calories and first cutting and grass hays are lowest in calories. This can vary though and it can be useful to have your hay analyzed if your horse has special needs ( EquiAnalytics will do this) To maintain weight, the average 1000 lb horse needs 16-20 lbs( 2% of body weight ) of hay per day depending on grain intake. To LOSE weight, the horse's intake must drop to around 14-16 lbs ( 1.5 % of body weight) . To GAIN weight the average horse needs to eat 2.5-3% of their body weight, which equates to 25-30 lbs of feed per day. Since 2/3 of this needs to be hay, that is 17-20 lbs of hay PLUS additional grain. A hanging scale can help you gauge how much you are really feeding. Weigh some representative servings to get an idea of how much hay is the right amount for your horse. You will need to do this periodically as different fields, cuttings, and seasons of hay will have different weights per flake/bale.

Once hay is covered, , we want to balance for vitamins and minerals. I think the best and most economical way to do this is with a "ration balancer". This is a feed designed to have all the vitamins and minerals needed by a horse in a small volume ( usually 1 pound for an average horse). Usually these are pelleted and most of the major feed manufacturers now have one. Purina has Win32, Buckeye has Gro and Win, ADM has StayStrong pellets, Tribute has Essential K. They are all similar in quality and contents. So start your feed plan with a ration balancer. This makes sure they have all the vitamins and minerals they need . Follow label directions for feeding but most of these products are 1 lb servings for the average horse. I recommend a ration balancer for ALL horses. Even overweight horses need to be sure they are getting appropriate vitamins and minerals.

Once you have vitamins and minerals, the concentrate comes into play. I think ALL horses regardless of body weight/metabolism benefit from a lower starch/higher fat feed. We know horses have fewer ulcers and colic problems on these type of diets. Basically every major feed manufacturer has one of these and they are all good. Tribute has Kalm and EZ ADM has ForageFirst, Purina has Strategy Healthy Edge and the Nature's Essentials line, Nutrena has Empower. Also, many senior feeds are relatively low in starch and higher in fat. Again, the easy keeper may not need any grain, only a ration balancer and hay. The maintenance horse may not need grain and may do well on hay and a ration balancer also. The hard keeper or horse who needs to gain weight WILL need grain and they can vary from 3-9 lbs of grain. I do not think most horses do well on diets with more than about 9 lbs of concentrate. If the horse can not gain on this diet, a fat supplement is needed.

In this case additional FAT preferably in the form of a liquid supplement such as CocaSoya oil ( Uckele Animal health) or CocoComplex oil should be fed. A horse can start on 1/4 cup twice a day and can build up to 3/4 to 1 cup twice a day if the calories are needed over about a month. Most horses reach a certain level of fat after which they no longer like the taste--this can be anywhere from 1/2 a cup to more than 1 cup depending on the horse. Obviously if the horse will not eat more than 1/2 cup you can not feed more than that. Fat is an

excellent energy source as it is concentrated ( about 1800 calories per cup) and also causes let stomach and metabolic issues than starches/grains do for horses. There are also powdered fat supplements for horses who will not eat the liquid ones.

In addition to all this blanketing a horse in colder months will encourage weight gain. This is because the horse is not using as may calories to stay warm.

If a horse is on a healthy balanced diet, there is little scientific evidence that any of the vast array of supplements out there will help them feel or perform better. Remember that most companies have an economic interest in getting you to believe your horse needs their product. If you have questions about supplements, or more questions about nutrition, contact your veterinarian.

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