

EQUUS

FEED YOUR HORSE RIGHT

PHOTO: ANASTASIA ZOLOTNITSKAYA

Here's how to avoid seven of the most common feeding mistakes.

By Laurie Bonner

We do our best to feed our horses well—and we generally succeed. And yet *knowing* what’s best doesn’t always mean that we *do* what’s best. Admit it: You realize a green salad is the more healthful meal, but how often do you grab a burger and fries when you’re on the run? Likewise, the way we feed our horses is sometimes influenced more by our need to rush through our busy schedules than by their nutritional needs.

Other factors influence the way we feed horses, too: the blur of sometimes contradictory information, as well as our own emotional need to feel as good as possible about the precious time we spend with our animals. Usually, the consequences of less-than-optimal feeding regimens are relatively minor, costing us extra money perhaps but doing no real harm. But the worst feeding mistakes can have serious consequences: Some deficiencies or excesses pose an actual health threat; others may subtly rob a horse of vitality.

To help you avoid the most common feeding pitfalls, we asked leading equine nutritionists to describe the problems they most often see. If you recognize some of your own practices in this list, take heart—a fix is usually readily accomplished. If, however, you believe significant changes are needed in your horse’s ration, consult with your veterinarian or an equine nutritionist for advice.

Mistake #1: Paying too little attention to forage 2

Mistake #2: Overloading the grain bucket 3

Mistake #3: Feeding by volume rather than weight..... 3

Mistake #4: Giving the wrong feed to the wrong horse..... 4

Mistake #5: Overloading the nutrients..... 5

Mistake #6: Failing to offer salt..... 6

Mistake #7: Offering too little free-choice fresh water..... 6



Mistake #1: Paying too little attention to forage

Ideally, the average horse's ration is primarily hay and pasture grass, with modest amounts of concentrates, such as grain, pelleted or sweet feed. But frequently, little emphasis is placed on the *quality* of forage offered, says Kathleen Crandell, PhD, an equine nutritionist with Kentucky Equine Research in Lexington, KY. "Too many people think that hay is just busywork for the horse and do not realize that it is a major calorie source that can vary greatly with quality. If you've tried everything to get a horse's weight up but are still feeding stemmy, old timothy hay, switching to a leafy grass hay that's not overly mature is a very safe way to get more calories."

Besides providing more nutrients, better quality hay is also more economical. For one thing, poor quality hay contains less digestible fiber, so horses have to eat much more to derive the same amount of nutritional value. Yet because it is less palatable, horses tend to leave

more of it uneaten. In contrast, good quality hay rarely goes to waste—horses are likely to devour every last leaf and stem.

Hay made from different grass species varies somewhat in appearance, but in general the good stuff has several distinguishing characteristics:

- **Leafiness:** The leaves contain about 90 percent of a plant's protein, so ideally you want bales with fewer stems and large seedheads.
- **Color:** The hue of good hay can vary but is generally some shade of light to medium green for grass hays, and darker green for alfalfa. Some yellowing is natural if the hay was sunbleached, but too much yellow likely indicates that the grass was overmature when cut and contains less digestible fiber.
- **Aroma:** Good hay smells fresh and slightly sweet. Pungent, acrid or musty odors are signs of mold or other quality deficits.
- **Texture:** If you squeeze a handful, good hay feels soft and pliable while poorer hays have coarser stems that will stab your skin.
- **Weight:** Good quality bales are lightweight and springy; if you drop one on its end it ought to bounce.
- **Purity:** Good hays contain few weeds and no foreign material, such as sticks, wire or dead insects or animals. If you want to know more about the nutritional value of a batch of hay, you can send a sample off to be analyzed. Contact your county or state extension agent for advice.



Mistake #2: Overloading the grain bucket

Grain and sweet feed are potent sources of energy. In fact, they contain many more soluble carbohydrates than most pleasure horses require. Feeding a horse more concentrates than he needs can be harmful to his health: The intake of too many calories leads to obesity, and high-starch grains have been implicated in a variety of health problems, including colic and laminitis. For most horses, the less grain fed, the better.

That said, some horses need more calories than they can get from forage alone. For example, horses who undergo an hour or more of daily training in sports such as reining or jumping, and those who compete in the most strenuous sports, such as racing or endurance, require extra rations in the form of grains or other concentrated feeds to maintain weight.

If your horse needs the added boost of concentrated feeds, it's best to break the portion up into as many small meals as you can. It's common to feed grain twice a day, in the morning and evening, but it's better whenever possible to divide the ration into smaller portions—four or more mini meals per day. Avoid feeding concentrates totaling more than 0.5 percent of your horse's weight in any single meal; this translates into about four to five pounds for the average horse.



Mistake #3: Feeding by volume rather than weight

If you hold a coffee can filled with corn in one hand and one containing oats in the other hand, you will notice a significant difference in weight. Corn is heavier, and it's also higher in calories than other feeds. Of course, we're all used to scooping out a uniform portion of feed at mealtime, but when it comes to calculating nutrition, it is the weight that matters, not the volume—something to keep in mind whenever you change feeds.

Even pelleted and sweet feeds can vary in density and volume. "Two different manufacturers can

PHOTOS: KERSTIN KLAASSEN (TOP); ISTANKOV (BOTTOM)

make feeds that seem similar on the tag in fat, fiber and protein but the density could be very different,” Crandell says. “I have weighed a number of different feeds in a large coffee can and found that some were close to one pound different in weight but equal in volume.”

So, when you’re planning to change or adjust your feeds, be sure to read the bag for the nutritional content per pound, and then use a kitchen scale to determine how much a pound really is.

Mistake #4: Giving the wrong feed to the wrong horse

In any catalog or feed store today you’ll find a variety of bagged feeds labeled for specific types of horses—growing youngsters, hard-working adults, broodmares, senior citizens, etc. All are formulated to provide the exact amount of calories and nutrition those animals need, and giving the wrong feed to the wrong horse can result in harmful imbalances. “The biggest consequence is that adult rations don’t have the mineral levels young horses need,” says Sarah Ralston, VMD, PhD, Dipl. ACVN, associate professor at Rutgers University. “The result can be abnormal growth and developmental orthopedic disease.”

Also, once you’ve determined the amount of concentrates your horse needs for extra calories, be sure to choose a feed that provides the optimum nutrition in that serving size. “The most common mistake I see is feeding below rate,” says Crandell—that is, feeding a horse less than the recommended serving size. “When formulating feed, you can’t make it work for every horse,” she explains. “You can’t balance the vitamins and minerals for a horse getting one pound of feed without poisoning the horse getting 10 pounds.” Conversely, if the recommended serving size is five pounds, the horse who is getting only one pound is getting only a fifth of the added vitamins and minerals.

“If the minimum serving is too much, it’s not the right feed for your horse,” Crandell says.



PHOTO: ANASTASIYA ZOLOTNITSKIYA



Mistake #5: Overloading the nutrients

“One common mistake is adding supplements to the horse’s diet without first checking to see if the ration is already overloaded with any specific nutrients,” says Crandell. To avoid creating harmful imbalances, calculate the nutrients a horse is getting from his basic feed ration before adding a vitamin or mineral supplement.

Products formulated to support specific body processes, such as joint repair or hoof growth, are less likely to cause nutritional overloads, but be sure to read their labels so you know what you’re getting. Some supplements that contain glucosamine, chondroitin sulfate, hyaluronan or biotin are also enhanced with vitamins and minerals.

“I’ve seen vitamin A toxicity in horses who were given multiple supplements that all contained similar ingredients,” Ralston says. Selenium, an important mineral, is also toxic in high quantities and may be an ingredient in different supplements as well as commercial feeds. “If you’re already using a good vitamin supplement, you probably don’t need vitamins in your joint supplement, too,” says Crandell.

Of course, nutritional supplements are often beneficial and sometimes essential. Horses whose hay is grown in selenium-poor soils need supplemental selenium.

Likewise, horses who receive hay but have little access to pasture may benefit from supplements containing vitamins A and E, because levels of these nutrients begin to deteriorate once grass is cut. Also, elderly horses, growing youngsters, broodmares and others with special nutritional needs are likely to benefit from vitamin supplements, as are horses in strenuous sports. Vitamin E, in particular, is often given to elite athletes to help them recover from exertion.

If you have any questions about your horse’s nutritional needs, consult your veterinarian or an equine nutritionist.

6



Mistake #6: Failing to offer salt

Sodium and chloride—the components of table salt—are electrolytes essential to many bodily functions. Both are lost in sweat and must be replaced from the diet. These are also the only essential nutrients that are not naturally present in grasses and grains.

Horses have a natural appetite for salt and consume what they need if given the opportunity. Placing a salt block in your herd's pasture is the easiest way of providing access to this vital nutrient, but to ensure that all horses get the salt they need, you may decide to put out multiple blocks or even place a small block in each horse's stall.

If you choose the latter option, be warned, says Crandell: "Some horses kept in stalls a lot will get bored and start overeating salt, and this will make them drink a lot more and then pee a lot more." For these horses, she suggests offering just a daily portion—one or two ounces of loose salt, or more if it's hot or the horse has been sweating heavily. "If the diet is balanced, plain white table salt is fine," she adds. "It doesn't have to be mineralized."

If you do offer loose salt, it's best to keep it in a bucket rather than pouring it over feed. A horse's need for salt may fluctuate daily—if you give too little, you can create imbalances; too much, and the feed may become unpalatable.

7



Mistake #7: Offering too little free-choice fresh water

A variety of "old horsemen's tales" once advised withholding water from horses under particular circumstances; for example, many people still adhere to the notion that offering cold water to a hot, sweating horse will cause colic.

However, researchers now know that offering a cool drink to a hot horse does no harm, and it will help him recover from exertion more quickly. In fact, ensuring that horses have access to a ready supply of fresh, clean water is one of the best ways to reduce the risks of impaction colic, especially in those kept primarily on dried forage.

Make sure that every horse has access to the water you supply. Low ranking herd members may be bullied away from troughs, and arthritic horses may be unwilling to climb down steep streambeds. Providing more than one source of water can help remedy situations like these.