



## NUTRITION SUGGESTIONS

WORDS: KATE BARBER

### Keep your horse in top shape with these useful feeding tips.

The idea of feeding a horse may appear simple but many horse owners are uninformed about the fundamentals. It is a fact that there is no golden rule relevant involving the nutrition requirements of a horse, it largely depends on the age, bodyweight and the level of activity.

1. Book in your Equine Vet to perform a wellness exam on your horse every year. Your Equine Vet can then suggest dietary recommendations based on your horse's current weight and exercise routine and highlight any deficiencies that may be obvious from a blood test.
2. De-worm on a regular basis—don't let parasites rob your horse of his nutrients. Do be careful not to over-do this however - if you have a really good mucking out programme it can sometimes be wise to get a sample of your horse's dung to the Vet's to see if there actually is a worm count present. If there isn't, some of the harsh modern day wormers can cause colic like symptoms.

3. Rotate pastures - overgrazed pastures are less nutritious and prone to parasite contamination from manure if you don't regularly muck out or harrow. Some horses/ponies however, thrive in overgrazed pastures otherwise they are prone to becoming overweight and developing associated health problems - be careful not to "kill these ones with kindness."
4. To prevent over-weight issues, make sure your horse receives regular exercise including daily turnout. 24/7 turnout is

optimal but beware of excess nutrients from rich pasture. Much land has been top dressed with Super Phosphate over the years as well and this can also lead to irregularities with our sensitive equines.

5. Lack of dental care, including regular floating, results in less efficient chewing of food. Horses will sometimes just not even try to eat if they have tooth problems and you may be thinking it is their diet, stomach ulcers etc when it could be their teeth. Usually you will get away with a tooth problem on a grass diet but it is more obvious when they have to try and chew their way through a large grain or hard premix type feed.
6. If your pastures alone don't offer the nutrition your horses need, supplement them with additional rations after consulting your Veterinarian. A professional Soil Test is always a good idea to see what minerals are lacking in your particular area too. This is important if buying a horse from another region - soils in New Zealand vary widely and the change in your new horse's temperament may be related to a drastic mineral deficiency and/or what additives you feed.
7. Feed changes should be introduced slowly and preferably over several weeks. Always ask what the previous person has fed your new purchase. I once bought a horse whose coat was very dull and he was extremely listless. Upon enquiring what supplements he was getting - FIVE of them had Selenium in them!
8. Vaccinate - even the healthiest of horses that receive the best nutrition can't fend off all disease - discuss with your Vet.
9. Feed by weight, not volume. Refer to the "Big Scoop on Feed" article that featured in the first issue of *SHOW CIRCUIT* October 2009.
10. Store your hay off the ground and in a dry shed to prevent mould and protect it from the elements to keep its nutritional value. You can lay pest bait (safely away from pets in a piece of downpipe lying alongside a shed wall) so you don't have rats and mice soiling the hay - they love to nest in it during winter! If you like rats and mice then you will need a fully vermin-proofed shed. Bad, soiled hay can be harmful to your horse if they eat it and, if they don't, it wastes in the paddock and the horse will lose weight without its necessary bulk.
11. If you keep horses together, keep an eye on those at the bottom of the pecking order to ensure they're getting their fair share of food. Always spread the feeds/hay well out around the paddock so one bossy horse can't "control" more than its own feed! And, keep everything well away from gates and fences.
12. Most horses benefit from free-choice access to bulk forage, preferably non-irrigated pasture and/or plain meadow hay and chaff.
13. Invest in the best water system you can - in the paddock and the stable. Clean water (and plenty of it) is vital to good digestive function. Many small lifestyle blocks are dependant on a town water supply these days so you may need a filter at the source to eliminate chemical overload (you should have one for YOUR own drinking water too!).
14. Regularly remove covers to inspect and feel through the coat to see if your horse has a good covering of flesh. Don't "turn him out" for months and then be shocked in September that his condition is light when you want him to compete all summer. A true horseman will look at their horse constantly and alter feed rates accordingly. Winter is really the time you should be "bulking him up" in readiness for the summer events.
15. Even if your horse is an easy keeper, he still needs his bulk forage ration. If being over-weight is an issue, consider slowly switching out rich calorie-dense hay and chaff, such as Lucerne, for meadow hay and chaff.
16. It goes without saying that pregnant and nursing mares, as well as foals and young horses, need special diets, so work with your Vet to make sure their nutritional needs are met. Rations and supplements will need to change along the way so do some homework and read up on what they will need.
17. A big mistake many people make is not to cut back on the "energy" feeds when giving the horse time off work. So long as you increase the bulk in the ration (chaff/beet etc), the horse will not lose weight.
18. If your older horse has trouble chewing, talk to your Vet about feeding soaked sugar beet pellets along with a senior feed product. Also, fat supplements such as in #30 below are very helpful and/or boiled barley or soaked oats to make up a softer feed.
19. Salt and electrolytes (for those horses in heavy work) are an essential in any horse's diet - refer to the *SHOW CIRCUIT* article in this issue regarding electrolytes.
20. Another basic - all horses/ponies are different and therefore you need to feed according to the work they are doing (or not), their temperament and size.
21. When supplementing your horse's diet, follow product label directions and, if unsure about something, always seek expert advice.

22. Just because a horse has a "hay belly" doesn't necessarily mean he's fat - does he have a good topline? Health problems can contribute to a pot-bellied appearance and the horse should look "even" all over if he is really healthy and well.

23. Try and work your horse before you feed him and before he has a belly full of grass. As their stomach lies next to their chest, it can press on the lungs when full and inhibit breathing. If a schooling session isn't going well, he may just be uncomfortable.

24. Keep horses that are prone to founder off grass high in sugars. Don't be fooled - brown grass can be just as deadly as the lush green varieties. New Zealand is one of the few countries where horses have access to good grass 24/7 and it can cause a lot of problems. Many people can unknowingly cause temperament issues in their horses by feeding Lucerne products as well as lush grass.

25. During cold weather, increase your horse's hay and chaff rations to help keep him warm and to fend off weight loss.

26. Remember the basics - horses thrive on "little and often," due the small size of their stomach, so don't just feed one large feed a day and expect him to be perfectly conditioned. They are natural foragers, due to the stomach size, and need to "pick" all day to avoid digestive upsets. So, it's not natural for them to gorge on lush grass for ten minutes and wonder what to do with themselves in the paddock for the rest of the day - this can be when they get into trouble.

27. As the horse is a creature of habit, try not to upset him and keep to the same feeding times each day.

28. Horses love "succulent" food so if you can't feed a bit of grass each day, offer carrots, apples, Lucerne etc to stimulate their interest in food.

29. There are many "modern" premixes available to feed our horses these days. These are wonderfully convenient for us but, if you have a picky eater and/or one with digestive upsets, you may need to look at going back to a more "natural" diet with your horse.

30. Rather than increasing grain rations for weight gain or added energy, up your horse's forage (meadow chaff/hay) ration and ask your Vet about the benefits of fat supplementation - oils etc, but if you introduce oil, do it over at least two weeks.