

Nutrition: Just remember the basics

Some of the most common questions equine veterinarians receive, revolve around proper feeding of performance horses. Nutrition constitutes 40-45 percent of the annual cost to manage a riding horse. So, with so many dollars on the line, it is extremely important to make sure you are spending your money wisely. If you just keep a few basics in mind you can stretch your “horse” dollars and improve their performance.

Just like with humans, the energy needs of a horse differ according to the level of work they must perform. Workloads usually required of hunter under saddle, western pleasure and equitation horses can be characterized as “light” work. Most horses competing in timed events, hunters, jumpers and many cattle-working events can be considered “moderate” work. Lastly, cutting horses, race horses and polo ponies are considered “heavy” work.

After determining how much energy your horse needs you can begin to design a feeding program. Horses with a “light” work load need to receive hay at 1 percent and concentrate at 0.5 percent of body weight. At a moderate workload, a horse will need to consume hay at 1.5 percent and concentrate at 1.0 percent of body weight. Horses in very intensive training programs need to consume hay at 2.0 percent and concentrate at 1.5 percent of body weight.

Hay is the mainstay of the equine diet as it is most closely resembles their natural food source. When choosing hay you should always pick a *high* quality hay. A leafy grass hay or alfalfa is the most common and the most readily available. High performance horses cannot eat enough hay to get the amount of energy they need and must be supplemented with a concentrate. Most balanced feeds from the feed store are adequate sources of carbohydrates.

Overfeeding of protein is a very common practice in the horse industry. One misconception is that as a horse’s level of activity increases, you should increase the protein in the grain. Most mature performance horses can eat a grain mix containing 10-12 percent protein. However, there are two situations where feeding a concentrate with higher crude protein concentration: 1) when feeding poor quality hay 2) when topdressing fat onto a concentrate for added energy (typically 2-3 year old horses that are still growing and in training).

Continual monitoring of your feeding program can help you know if you are keeping up with, or exceeding your horses energy needs. Ideally, you need to be able to feel the ribs but be unable to see them. Horses that are too thin are unable to strenuously exercise effectively as their bodies run of fuel. Conversely, horses that have too much body fat cannot dissipate enough heat which adversely affects their ability to perform.

By keeping a few of these basics in mind you can help make sure that you are not throwing away money on the wrong feed and that you are giving yourself the best chance of winning. If you have any other feed related questions, please don’t hesitate to ask.