



Horse Care:

Diet and Feeding

What nutrients required for a balanced diet?

Feeding your horse can seem complex, but basic guidelines can be tailored to each horse's needs to keep your horse happy and healthy.

Horses need a healthy, balanced diet to maintain proper weight, energy and natural feeding patterns. Regularly checking your horse's weight and condition with fat scoring can be a really positive step in horse management. While spotting an underweight horse is easy, being overweight can also pose health risks like laminitis.

There are five major nutrients that every horse needs:

1. Water - to maintain optimal function and prevent dehydration
2. Fibre - to maintain healthy gut function
3. Carbohydrates – to provide energy for maintenance and work
4. Fats - to help in absorption of nutrients
5. Protein - for growth and repair.

Are there rules of feeding horses?

There are various lists of “Rules of good feeding”, and these guidelines are a useful reminder of the basics:

- Ensure constant access to fresh water.
- Provide high-quality forage and feed.
- Feed small amounts regularly.
- Store feed in dry, clean conditions.
- Adjust feed based on bodyweight and activity.

- Gradually change feed over 10–14 days.
- Avoid exercise for an hour after cereal meals; offer fibre before workouts.
- Keep routines consistent.
- Clean buckets and stirrers often.

The importance of forage

Forage comprises high-fibre, low-starch feeds such as hay, haylage, grass, and chaffs. Sugar beet is also classified as forage, and numerous feed manufacturers produce fibre-based mixes or pellets.

The inclusion of forage is critical for maintaining a healthy digestive system, thereby decreasing the risk of colic. Chewing forage promotes saliva production, which plays a vital role in buffering stomach acids, subsequently lowering the likelihood of gastric ulceration. Providing forage prior to exercise can minimise the risk of stomach acid splashing and causing gastric mucosal injury.

As horses have evolved to consume small quantities frequently - chewing for up to 18 hours daily - forage is fundamental and should constitute the main component of an equine diet. Adequate forage intake is necessary to fulfil their natural chewing behaviour and prevent the development of stereotypical behaviours, particularly when grazing is limited due to seasonal restrictions or reduced turnout. Additionally, forage facilitates thermoregulation by producing heat during the breakdown of fibre in the hindgut.

Ideally, ad libitum forage should be offered at ground level; however, this may not be feasible when caloric intake must be controlled, such as when weight reduction is required. In such cases, extending feeding duration

through the use of enrichment, slow-feeder hay nets, or lower-calorie forage options helps avoid prolonged fasting periods.

How to use concentrates

Concentrates or cereals consist of grains such as oats, barley, and maize that are high in starch and energy. Feed companies manufacture cereal-based feeds with varying energy content. These feeds are generally used for horses engaged in moderate to heavy work, those that need to gain weight, or those that have difficulty maintaining their condition.

Cereal products may be fed as “straights”, where the raw cereal products are mixed before feeding, or more commonly as preprepared feed, either as a mix or a pelleted form.

Balancers and supplements

In addition to the main ingredients of the diet, balancers and/or supplements are frequently used to ensure a nutritionally balanced diet, to compensate for a nutritional deficiency, or to provide extra components which are valuable to a horse's health.

Balancers

Balancers are very useful if your horse doesn't need additional energy but still needs help obtaining their full vitamin and mineral intake. Balancers can be fed alongside a high forage diet and as part of a controlled diet.

Feed supplements

A variety of feed supplements are available on the market to address nutritional deficiencies in horses. However, it is essential to consult a veterinary surgeon or equine nutritionist prior to administering any supplements to ensure their suitability and safety.

The importance of water

Water is a primary nutrient for horses and plays a key role in regulating circulatory, lymphatic, digestive, and excretory systems, as well as maintaining body temperature. Insufficient water intake - due to limited access, frozen supply, or inadequate consumption - can hinder proper movement of food through the gut, increasing the likelihood of impaction colic, which results from a blockage in the intestine caused by firm feed material.

On average a horse will drink three to four buckets of water a day. This can be even more in hot weather. In freezing conditions, check the water twice a day to break the ice.

How do I choose a forage?

Hay and haylage

Hay is a type of forage harvested at full maturity and thoroughly dried prior to baling and storage. For optimal preservation, it is essential that hay is adequately dried before baling to minimise mould development.

In contrast, haylage is typically cut earlier in the growing season and only partially dried before being baled and sealed in layers of plastic. Its preservation depends on the exclusion of oxygen and, once opened, haylage must be consumed within a relatively short timeframe. Due to its partial drying, haylage generally provides higher nutritional value than hay; however, its greater moisture content may necessitate feeding larger amounts than dry hay.

The nutrient profile of forage, including sugar levels, can vary considerably. You can submit a forage sample to feed companies for

nutritional analysis. For horses that are overweight, have Equine Metabolic Syndrome, or are prone to laminitis, it is advisable to use forage with a combined sugar and starch content below 10-12%.

If there is uncertainty in regarding the nutritional content of the hay, you can soak it prior to feeding to reduce the free sugar levels.

Forage replacement

Elderly horses or those with dental issues may need feeding with a forage replacement which is often high fibre mash which can be easily chewed.

Straw

Straw is low in calories, high in fibre, and can slow feeding, making it suitable for horses that need weight management but only if their teeth are healthy. Straw should be clean, high-quality, and introduced gradually to prevent colic. Barley, oat, and wheat straw work as partial hay substitutes; horses often prefer barley or oat due to softness. Studies show replacing half of forage with straw may result in weight loss. If used as bedding, monitor intake.

Feed straw when:

- Weight loss on soaked hay isn't happening
- More fibre but fewer calories are needed
- Longer chewing and feeding times are required

Because straw has less nutrition, it may be necessary to ensure vitamin and mineral needs are met with a balancer.

Succulents

Succulents like apples, carrots, swede, parsnips, and turnips are safe treats that can add variety to a horse's diet and encourage picky eaters.

Feed in moderation if your horse is overweight, has EMS, or is prone to laminitis, as succulents add extra calories. Always slice them lengthways to prevent choking, as circular or cubed pieces can block the oesophagus causing Choke. Horses with dental issues may struggle to chew succulents properly.

How much should I feed my horse?

Ideally, horses would have continuous access to forage at ground level, but this is not always practical when managing their weight. As a general rule of thumb, most horses should consume about 2%–2.5% of their body weight in food daily, with a minimum of 1.5%. This can include grazing, forage, and supplemental feeds, tailored to each horse's needs.

To work out your horse's daily requirement it's useful to have an accurate body weight from a weighbridge. If this isn't achievable, then the weight from a weigh tape is recommended as a guideline. Follow the below calculation to work out your horse's daily requirement.

$[\% \text{ required}] \div 100 \times \text{Bodyweight (kg horse)} = \text{Total requirement in kg}$

For the “average” 500kg horse, 2% is 10kg.

After calculating total requirements, tailor feeding to each horse's needs. Assess your horse's workload honestly; overfeeding high-energy feed can cause gastric ulcers, obesity, and potentially behavioural problems. Most leisure and grassroots horses maintain energy and weight well on a high-forage diet.

Once the total nutritional requirement has been determined, it can be allocated according to the specific needs of the individual horse.

Accurately assessing the level of work your horse performs is essential. Overfeeding high-energy concentrates may result in behavioural issues as well as health conditions such as gastric ulceration and obesity. For most leisure and grassroots horses, a diet primarily composed of quality forage is generally sufficient to maintain appropriate energy levels and healthy body condition.

How do I monitor body condition?

Monitor your horse's condition regularly using fat scoring and weigh taping so you can adjust their diet as necessary. If overweight, reduce forage to 1.5–2% of body weight to lower calorie intake, but ensure forage lasts throughout the day - consider lower-calorie options like soaked hay or adding straw, and use small-holed haynets or hay balls. Never go below 1.5% without veterinary advice. If underweight and health issues are ruled out, increase forage to 2.5–3%, and consider higher-calorie forage or extra concentrate feeds if needed.