

feeding for building workloads



The changing of seasons and increase of workload and competitions are often times to review a horse's feeding regime.

Feeding at Grass

When looking to cut costs, and time input, it's easy to stop "feeding" those who are turned out completely and meeting or exceeding their calorie requirements on the spring grass. However, our extensive analyses of pasture and forages, over many years and from all over the country, reveal that modern hay, haylage and grazing is deficient in minerals and often in protein.

This makes a strong case for feeding a low-calorie balancer, like Lo-Cal or Performance Balancer, to supply what's lacking in forages, without the calories associated with a mix or cube, and which will ensure the horse is not missing out on essential nutrients, while also not adding to the waistline. Ponies, in particular, may survive perfectly well on grass alone but, if you're expecting any kind of performance out of them, over the coming months, nutritional support now will ensure they can step up to the plate with strong hooves, good muscle tone and a healthy metabolism.

Calories In < Calories Out

If they need to lose weight, the simple equation of "calories in < calories out" applies and, if the increase in calories burned through exercise is not enough to encourage sufficient weight loss, access to pasture may need to be moderated. This can be through strip-grazing, muzzling and/or turning out on poorer pasture but, while reducing turnout time may be effective, research has shown that ponies, in particular, will gorge themselves if kept off grass for too long so can eat just as much, if not more, in a shorter space of time.

In the early stages of a return to work, it's likely that your horse's resting diet will continue to suffice, as long as your chosen mix, cube or balancer is being fed to manufacturer's recommendations. Underfeeding a fully balanced compound feed, in any circumstance,

will mean the horse is not getting the daily recommended levels of vitamins, minerals and protein, which have been calculated by independent scientists and are then adhered to by all feed manufacturers.

Fully Balanced

Based on these scientific recommendations, mixes and cubes are all formulated to provide a balance of vitamins, minerals, protein and calories to provide a horse with a fully balanced diet, when fed alongside forage and according to bodyweight and workload. Balancers provide all the essential nutrients, without the calorie element, so are ideal, as the sole concentrate, for good-doers, or can be added to reduced amounts of a mix or cube to bring nutrient levels up without adding unwanted calories.

As workload increases, the horse's requirements for vitamins, minerals and protein increase correspondingly so, even if they are managing to meet calorie requirements from a combination of stored

How to adjust feed

(& maintain a balanced diet)

For a 500kg horse in
light - moderate work

**LOW
CALORIE**



500g balancer



**NO
mix or cubes**

**MODERATE
CALORIE**



250g balancer



1.5-2kg cubes/mix

**HIGH
CALORIE**

**NO
balancer**



3-4kg cubes/mix

Broad guideline only. Amounts will vary according to product and horse requirements.

body fat and forage/pasture, their diet will need to be adjusted to meet these growing nutritional needs. Protein, for example, is the main component of muscle and body tissue and is supplied in limited amounts by forage so working horses, particularly those whose physique we are looking to improve (build top line, strength etc), will require appropriate supplementation.

Slow Release Calories

Not all horses are good-doers and some need extra dietary calories to maintain, or gain condition, and fuel their work. For horses with challenging behaviour, we need to choose energy/calorie sources carefully and, while traditional conditioning and competition feeds tend to be cereal-based, there is now a growing choice of high calorie, low cereal (starch) options, like Ease & Excel and Ease & Excel Cubes, supplying slow release calories from digestible fibre and oil. For the particularly sensitive or stressy type, feeds formulated for horses prone to gastric ulcers are a wise choice as these are unlikely to exacerbate excitability and will support gastric health and digestive efficiency too.

Electrolyte Support

With the warmer weather and gradual increase in workload, it's likely that horses will sweat more and lose electrolyte salts, including magnesium and calcium, which are involved in muscle function. The use of a good quality electrolyte, like Aqua-Aide, is therefore to be recommended, whenever a horse sweats, to ensure these salts are replaced, aiding rehydration and recovery after exercise and helping to support correct muscle function. This way, not only is the diet supplying all that is necessary to build and repair muscle tissue but we are also ensuring these muscles can function to the best of their ability.

For advice on adapting feeding to changing workloads, contact Baileys Horse Feeds on 01371 850247 or visit www.baileyshorsefeeds.co.uk.

Quality Nutrients

It is not just the level of protein in a horse's diet that counts though, it is the quality and this is determined by the individual amino acid "building blocks" of which it is made up. With the right dietary components, the horse's body can manufacture most amino acids but there are a small number of "essential" ones, like methionine and lysine, which have to be included in the horse's diet. Good quality protein supplies these essential amino acids and is found in ingredients like alfalfa, micronised soya and distillers' grains (a by-product of the brewing industry).

Choosing a feed with good quality protein sources, and formulated for the appropriate workload, then feeding it at recommended levels should build the desired muscle and top line without the need for expensive amino acid supplementation. Correct training or exercise is necessary to help the horse's physique develop in the correct way; even unbacked youngsters, who are able to roam and exercise naturally, will develop muscle, as far as their genetics dictate, as long as their diet supplies appropriate levels of good quality protein.

Vitamins and Minerals

Just as the horse's requirements for dietary protein and calories increase with workload, so does his need for vitamins and minerals. These are involved in many of the metabolic processes throughout the body, including the release of energy from food, whilst minerals are also vital components of body tissues, including bone and muscle.

Like protein, it is not just the levels of these nutrients in a diet which matter but also the form in which they are supplied which determines how easily the body can absorb them from the food and utilise them. Reputable feed manufacturers will use "chelated" minerals which are attached to protein molecules, to make them more easily absorbed and available to the horse, and will ensure that levels of "antioxidant" vitamins and minerals are higher in feeds for increased workloads.

Practicalities

So what does this mean from a practical point of view? If your horse or pony is currently getting nothing (but grass) and is maintain or gaining condition, personally, I'd introduce a balancer, now (as with all new feeds, gradually, over 7 to 10 days)! Choose one to suit your horse's current and, hopefully, increasing workload and be prepared to change again, as workload progresses. If he's on half rations, or less, of his normal mix or cube, add a balancer at an appropriate level to pull nutrient levels up. The chart above gives a rough idea of how you can increase, or decrease, quantities of mix/cube and balancer to vary dietary calorie levels, while maintaining an optimum balance of nutrients.

If you are currently feeding a low energy high fibre mix or cube and are increasing the workload, you will need to consider switching up to a higher energy option as your horse's calorie requirements increase. This change over can be done in a similar way to the balancer/mix/cube combination although, if you prefer to keep a horse or pony on a lower energy feed, while in harder work, you'll need to add a balancer again, to bring levels of essential nutrients up.

