

# 10 Rules for Feeding Horses

## 1. Put Forage First!

All feeding programs should begin with good-quality forage, either as hay or pasture. For pleasure horses, this may be their entire diet, consuming as much as 2½ percent of their body weight per day. Horses consuming large amounts of concentrates should consume at least 1 percent of their body weight in forage per day. Adequate intake of good-quality forage is important for proper gut function. In addition, it prevents boredom and the development of stall vices. Good-quality hay is generally characterized as having a fresh (not musty) smell, green color, high leaf content, and no weeds and other debris. Pastures should be composed of forage plants that are safe, palatable, and free of toxic weeds and trees.

## 2. Clean, Fresh Water

The average horse will consume 8 to 12 gallons of water per day, more if it is a lactating broodmare or exercising horse. In the summer, water intake may double as the horse expires and sweats large amounts of water. Clean, fresh water should be available at all times, particularly before and after feeding. Exercising horses should also be offered water immediately after working, but the amount a horse drinks at one time should be limited until it is completely cooled down.

## 3. Feed by Weight, Not by Volume

Scoops and coffee cans may be handy, but they don't tell us how much feed a horse is actually getting. Feedstuffs vary in density, so a scoop of oats and a scoop of pellets are by no means the same weight. Commercial concentrates also may vary across manufacturers or even from batch to batch. The same is true for hay, as not all flakes or blocks within a bale are the same weight. A simple kitchen scale can be a very handy tool in the feed room for ensuring your horses are getting the appropriate amount of feed.

## 4. Small Meals

Horses evolved as continuous grazers, and their stomachs can hold only small amounts of feed at a time. Furthermore, feeding small meals ensures a horse can absorb as many nutrients as possible before the feed

passes into the hindgut for fermentation. If a horse consumes more than 0.75 percent of its body weight in concentrate per day, it should be divided into at least two equal meals. For an average 1,100-pound horse, anything over 8 pounds per day must be divided into at least two meals, though many horse owners will divide smaller amounts to prevent gastrointestinal problems.

## 5. Feed on Time

Feeding meals on a regular schedule, preferably every 12 hours, maximizes nutrient absorption and minimizes the risk of colic. If a horse requires more than 1½ percent of its body weight in concentrate per day, the total amount fed should be divided over three or four meals of equal size, spread evenly throughout a 24-hour period. For an 1,100-pound lactating broodmare or intensely exercising horse, anything more than 16 pounds of concentrate needs to be divided into at least three feedings spaced 8 hours apart.

## 6. Maintain Proper Body Condition

Horses feel and perform best at their ideal body condition. For pleasure and performance horses, this is a moderate body condition where the ribs can be easily felt but not seen, the back is relatively flat, withers have a rounded appearance, and fat deposits around the tailhead are slightly spongy. Broodmares should be kept closer to a fleshy body condition, characterized by a crease down the back, spongy fat around the tailhead, and ribs that can still be felt even though there is fat between them.

## 7. Make Changes Slowly

Any changes in feed type or amount should be done carefully to avoid upsetting gut function. It takes at least 2 weeks to do this safely. When changing feeds, begin by substituting a small amount of new feed for the present feed (on a weight basis) and then gradually increasing the proportion of new feed until it is the only feed offered. To increase (or decrease) the amount of feed offered, adjust the amount by ¼ to ½ pound per feeding each day, allowing 1 or 2 days between increases. When introducing horses to pasture, limit grazing to a couple of hours per day, and gradually increase grazing time.

## 8. Separate Plates, Please

When feeding horses in groups, such as in pasture, use individual feeders for concentrates. Space feeders out of kicking range from one another yet close enough that all feed can be put out in a short amount of time. Providing each horse with its own feeder will cut down on fighting for feeder space and allow more timid horses the opportunity to consume their ration.

## 9. Storage Is Key

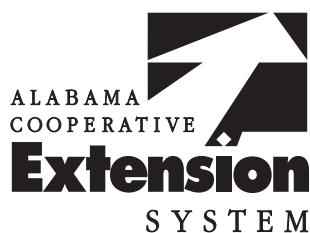
Minimize spoilage and contamination of feed by storing it properly. Hay should be stored in a covered, dry place, away from moisture that may cause the growth of toxic mold. Grains and other concentrates should be stored in a secure area that keeps out rodents, insects, and wandering horses. Purchase no more than 2 weeks worth of grain or concentrate at a time to minimize spoilage. Store all feeds and supplements away from chemicals and cleaners. Implement rodent control practices to reduce the spread of disease.

## 10. Maintain Appropriate Dental, Vaccination, and Deworming Schedules

Poor teeth make it difficult for horses to chew and physically break down feed. Weight loss and quidding, or dropping of partially chewed feed, can be a sign that a dental exam is needed. Horses that are sick or have a high parasite load are also unable to properly utilize the nutrients provided in the feed. Visit with your veterinarian to set up dental, vaccination, and deworming schedules appropriate for your horses.

## References

- Evans, J. W. 2001. *Horses: A Guide to Selection, Care and Enjoyment*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: W. H. Freeman.
- National Research Council. 2007. *Nutrient Requirements of Horses*, 6<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.



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