

Feeding - An art or a science? - Or both!

Firstly, do you know the rules of feeding and why they are rules?

Below the rules, I have listed a few facts you may not know and which may surprise you!

The Rules

Why!?

Feed little & often

The horse has a very small stomach - just the size of a rugby football and it works best when it is 2/3rds full. The horse is a trickle feeder - when out in the wild or the field, it eats little and often. Feed no more than 2kg (4.5lbs) per feed - this includes the chaff & sugarbeet where fed.

Always water before feeding & where possible, always have fresh water available for your horse to drink.

If a horse drinks a lot of water after it has eaten, it washes undigested or partially undigested food out of its' stomach before it is ready to go to the next stage of digestion. This can cause colic and certainly prevents the horse utilizing his feed to the full, so it is a waste of food too.

Make changes to a horse's feed gradually (eg, over a week)

The horse's gut develops feed specific bacteria to break down the types of feed you give your horse. If you suddenly change the feed, the redundant bacteria die in the gut and can become toxic leading to serious colic or even death. If you change the diet gradually, the bacteria are able to change gradually and therefore cope with the different feed. When you buy or sell a horse, always ask/tell the seller/buyer which brand of feed they use, so that the horse doesn't have to undergo a change of feed and home. The change of home is traumatic enough.

Feed according to size, condition, age, type, breed, work being done, temperament, time of year etc etc

Differences between the factors on the left make all the difference when deciding how much to feed and what types of food to feed your horse or pony. Although compound feeds (mixes and nuts) have a recommended feeding requirement on the back of the sack, you must also take into consideration those factors mentioned on the left. For example, in the Spring, a 16hh 4 yr old in light work, will not need as much concentrated feed as a 16hh 10 year old about to go eventing. Some horses lose condition easily, some get fat easily. Feed them accordingly!

Always feed good quality forage

It is a waste of your time, effort and money to feed poor quality feeds - for example, bad quality hay not only has very little feed value, but is also harmful to your horse's respiratory system due to dust and spores. Bagged feed that is out of date will have less nutritional value than fresh feeds and the vitamins and minerals which are in the feed will have lost their value too. In the long term it will save you money to feed good quality roughage and concentrates.

Feed plenty of roughage

The horse's gut is designed to break down roughage (grass, hay, haylage, chaff etc) rather than concentrates, so as much roughage should be fed as possible. At least 30% of the horse's diet, but nearer 60-70% where possible. (A racehorse or event horse may be on as little as 30% for ultimate leanness and fitness)

Feed at the same time every day

Horse's are creatures of habit and should be kept to the same routine every day. This helps keep them calm, relaxed and happy.

Always use clean feed bowls and utensils

As horse's are fussy feeders who are easily put off their feed, you should keep all feed bowls and utensils scrupulously clean. This also helps prevent disease.

Feed something succulent every day

This includes grass, so where possible, turn your horse out as often as you can. Alternative succulents include sugar beet, carrots, apples, swedes and turnips. But there is no substitute for good quality grass.

Don't exercise immediately after feeding

It takes a horse approx 20 mins to eat his feed and 1.5 hours for that feed to pass through the stomach. Give your horse plenty of time to digest his feed before riding him. If it is necessary for you to ride very early in the morning, feed after exercise, or give a very small feed beforehand.

So, what else do you need to know? Compound feeds (mixes and nuts) are fully balanced diets and therefore, you should not add straights (oats, barley, maize, etc) nor extra supplements to the feed. If you do, you risk unbalancing the balanced feed you have just spent your money on!

In the event of you feeding less than the recommended required amount for your horse or pony, you may need to use a supplement to ensure your horse is getting all the nutrients he needs. If you find this confusing, consult the feed advisor at the feed manufacturers (they all have them these days) or ask your trainer.

Haylage - there is a belief around that haylage is more heating than hay and therefore you should feed less of it.

However, this is not right! Ask any feed expert. Haylage has a much higher water content than hay and therefore you need to feed MORE haylage than hay. The feed experts will also tell you that haylage is not more heating than hay. However, if you suddenly change your horse from a say 14 lbs hay to 7 lbs haylage which also has a much higher water content, the result will be that your horse will get loose droppings! He is supposed to have lots of roughage (dry matter) and you have just halved the quantity of roughage and added a whole lot of water content! Of course your horse now has the squitts!!

Hay - should be fed soaked, but how long for? The longer you soak the hay, the more you spoil the goodness of the nutrients. To maintain the nutrients, soak it for half an hour. If you have a laminitic pony or horse, soak it for 12 hours so there is lots of roughage to help your horse but the nutrient level is reduced.

Protein v Carbohydrates. Protein DOES NOT give your horse energy. Protein is responsible for your horse's body build and repair. Carbohydrates give your horse energy.

You CANNOT turn fat into muscle. Fat and muscle are 2 completely different components. Fat is excess energy stored in the body as adipose tissue and it lies on top of the muscles under the skin. If you feed your horse more carbohydrates than it needs for its maintenance and work, it will store those carbohydrates as a layer of fat. In the extreme, this can completely hide the definition of the horse's muscles. Muscle on the other hand, is a specialist tissue responsible for contraction and therefore movement.

For your horse to gain muscle and top line, you need to feed protein to enable the body to build the muscles and use exercise to develop those muscles.

Feeding any energy excess to requirements will exaggerate the 'natural metabolism' of the horse.....it will NOT change his character.

A heating feed is one which when digested, provides internal warmth. Most internal warmth is produced when the horse is digesting fibre in the large intestine (hind gut). So when the weather turns cold, feed your horse more roughage.

Confused??? If you find feeding your horse a complete mystery, get help and advice, either from your trainer (they should be able to give you sound advice based on their knowledge and experience, or from a feed expert. Websites such as www.dodsonandhorrell.com give you the opportunity to fill in a form to describe your horse so that they can recommend how much you feed your horse - see here: <http://www.dodsonandhorrell.com/index.phtml?detailsMode=helpline-horse> or phone their helpline for verbal advice. They are very helpful.