

Feeds and Supplements

By Patrick M Tabor

Most horse owners try to provide the best diets for their horses, yet there's often a difference between what they think the animals need and what the animals actually need. There are also some misunderstandings about how those needs can be met. With many good commercial feeds available and countless supplements on the shelves, it's hard to know what's best for the horse.

Basic Feeds

The foundation of a good diet is forage. Start with hay or pasture and add grain concentrates and supplements only as needed. Most horses get by on little or no supplemental feed if they have good-quality forage. Fresh water is also very critical. The story changes, however, if horses are stabled and don't have access to pasture because you've limited what you provide them.

Pick the hay that best fits your horse. Don't buy alfalfa for a fat, retired horse as it is better suited for a young, growing horse or lactating mare. Find a lower-quality, lower-calorie hay for the fat, retired horse. He'll do better with hay that's safe to feed in large amounts so he can occupy more time eating and be happier.

Protein supplements might be needed if hay is low in quality--if it stood too long in the field before cutting or if hot and dry conditions matured the crop too quickly. Grain or a commercial feed can be added if the horse needs more calories and nutrients than what he gets from the hay. For a hard-working horse, supplementing fat is useful if the horse needs more energy in the diet without the risk for laminitis or colic inherent in a high-grain ration.

Flax is popular as a fat supplement, and if it's whole flax (without the protein taken out); this acts as a protein supplement as well. Some people get nervous about feeding too much protein, but this is generally not an issue. Here in the West, where some regions grow alfalfa and relatively little grass hay, some horses eat nothing but alfalfa and do fine.

A high-protein diet is not harmful unless a horse is working hard in the heat; then he might have trouble dissipating the extra heat generated in protein digestion. But for the average horse, extra protein is not a problem; he just breaks it down and excretes it. A high-protein diet is necessary, however, for a young, growing horse or lactating mare.

When using a national brand feed product formulated by equine nutritionists, and when feeding at the minimum recommended level, additional supplements are usually not needed. These complete feed mixes are formulated for the target animal's needs (young, growing horse, broodmare, hard-working horse, or older horse). When fed as directed, the horse will get the proper amount of calcium, phosphorus, copper, zinc, etc.

Some people add other products such as vitamin or mineral supplements, hoof supplements, coat conditioners and joint supplements. Most are beneficial under certain conditions, as long as they are not overdone. Certain situations warrant using supplements or higher amounts of vitamins and minerals, but some of these (such as iron, iodine, selenium, and vitamins A, D, and E) leave

little room for error regarding overdose. For example, it's easy for a horse to get too much of a certain vitamin or mineral if you are feeding several different supplements that all contain it. Overdoses of some (i.e. water-soluble B vitamins) are harmless because the body excretes the excess, but others are not as easily removed and overdose is cumulative. It's important to know what the horse actually needs, and it's crucial to read labels and know what you are feeding.

Supplements

A hoof supplement usually contains biotin, zinc, and methionine, which are considered the three magic ingredients. Biotin is water-soluble. If you feed too much, it may cost you more money, but won't hurt the horse. Toxicity threshold for zinc is fairly high, so zinc in a hoof supplement probably won't hurt the horse. Methionine is an amino acid and, if not utilized, will just run through the body's metabolism. Hoof supplements aren't always necessary, but are generally not dangerous. They are fed in small amounts and not meant to be the total dietary source.

Coat conditioners are generally fat supplements. The most popular ones contain more omega-3 fatty acids and less omega-6, striving for higher percentage of healthy fats. If your horse is an easy keeper, a fat supplement is not beneficial. Extra calories are not an issue if the horse is working, but are a problem if he's not getting enough exercise to burn off the extra calories.

Joint supplements are often given since they are not found in regular grain diets. Silicon, glucosamine, chondroitin, MSM, etc. can be part of a bone and joint program. Many horses in athletic careers are given joint supplements to keep them sound and prevent soreness/stiffness.

Regarding vitamins and minerals, if you're feeding a balanced diet--the right kind of hay for the horse and a supplement or concentrate designed for that horse--extra vitamins and minerals are not needed. Hard-working athletes at peak performance might benefit from a well-rounded vitamin/mineral mix. They don't need it all the time, but in periods of hard work the horse might be helped by more B vitamins, vitamin E, and selenium.

There are medical conditions where a horse requires higher amounts of nutrients. Vitamin E and Selenium are helpful with neurological problems. Magnesium and chromium help the insulin-resistant horse. Biotin, zinc, and methionine are used for horses with weak hoof horn. But, unless a horse has a specific need, the horse owner should not feel compelled to add a supplement.

Bottom Line

The key to a good feed program is to start with the proper type of forage for the individual, then pick the right concentrate or supplement (if needed) to balance the forage. For an older horse or any horse with a problem, tweak the diet to help prevent, fix or manage the problem. In those instances, work with your vet to guide you in the right direction.

Shooting in the dark and indiscriminately adding supplements can sometimes be harmful. For instance, a horse with liver problems should never be fed high amounts of oil or protein since these must be processed in the liver. Professional help in formulating the most helpful, healthy diet for a problem horse is the best way to go.