

## Q & A—Feeding Two-Year-Old Performance Horses

**I own and train American Saddlebreds for the show ring, and am being asked to work with more and more two-year-olds, as the trend for showing younger horses seems to be well-trenched. I have a hard time getting these youngsters to an appropriate body weight. Because of their age, some lankiness is to be expected, but I can't seem to get them properly conditioned without pouring the grain to them. When I do that, I worry about other problems. Help, please.**

By the time a horse has reached its second birthday, there is little question that it has achieved the majority of its mature height. A horse may still grow a couple of inches, but vertical growth is nearly complete. Absolute skeletal maturity does not occur till much later in life, perhaps at around six years old.


As you allude to in your question, the two-year-old horse, particularly a Saddlebred, probably does not have the appearance of a mature horse because it might lack the width and breadth across the chest and quarters, and the depth of barrel and flank. The volume of muscling is also likely not near that of an adult horse.

While vertical growth might be almost complete, the skeletons and other tissue systems of the two-year-old horse are far

from mature. Therefore, in feeding two-year-old horses, owners and trainers must take into account the nutrients needed for growth and performance.

Little research has been done to quantify the nutrient requirements of horses this age. Requirements for two-year-olds are derived largely from combining information about the nutritional needs for growth and performance. Kentucky Equine Research (KER) found that the quantity of a well-formulated, properly fortified concentrate necessary to sustain moderate exercise often contains sufficient nutrients to support growth. Because of a fairly high level of intake (but never more than five pounds in one feeding), most high-quality concentrates contain adequate protein, calcium, and phosphorus for two-year-olds. Though it doesn't appear to be the case in this instance, if calorie intake must be restricted in a two-year-old, higher levels of vitamin and mineral fortification might be indicated.

As you pointed out, there are risks involved in feeding large concentrate meals. You can replace a portion of the concentrate with a high-fat supplement such as vegetable oil or rice bran. These energy-dense supplements will add calories to the ration but not much volume, so meal size stays the same or decreases. Another strategy is to feed the same amount of grain but separate it into more than two meals. A midday meal will significantly decrease the size of the morning and evening meals. Be sure horses have high-quality hay to eat at all times during the day. Not only will this decrease boredom and reduce the likelihood of gastric ulcers, but it will increase calorie consumption.

In conclusion, the nutrient requirements of the two-year-old are intermediate between the growing foal and the adult performance horse. If a two-year-old is in training, it can be fed any high-quality concentrate that would typically be fed to adult performance horses. The elevated level of feed intake needed to meet the energy demands for exercise will provide the nutrients needed for growth. 

*Two-year-olds involved in all types of work are prone to nutritional deficiency if they are not fed to support both growth and exercise.*





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