

Changing seasons offer nutritional challenges for horse owners. As winter wanes and summer approaches, horsemen must recognize that changes in pasture growth may ultimately affect the way they feed their horses.

As the grass brightens from brown to green, the nutrient content of the plant changes considerably. Horses will undoubtedly relish the newfound forage, but care must be taken to allow only the amount of grazing time necessary to sustain optimal body weight. If horses are allowed

Gear Up For Warm Weather

unchecked access to spring grass, they can quickly become overweight. The perils of obesity include decreased stamina and a greater likelihood for unsoundness.

Several management strategies can be put into place for the voracious eaters in a herd. One of the easiest ways to manage such horses is to limit their time in lush pastures by placing them in stalls, corrals, or drylots for a significant part of the day (12-16 hours). While in confinement, horses should have something to munch on, preferably low-energy forage such as grass hay. When left with nothing to eat for hours at a time, horses become predisposed to gastric ulcers and may develop oral vices such as wood chewing and cribbing due to boredom or lack of fiber intake. This may be the option of choice for performance horses that are starting back into work after a winter's break. Not only will confinement keep calorie intake in check, but midday stalling helps horses maintain rich, deep-colored coats.

If an enclosure is not available, a horse should be outfitted with a grazing muzzle. Most muzzles are made of nylon or leather and attach directly to the halter with clips or snaps. A hole cut in the floor of the muzzle allows constant, though minimal, forage intake.

Grazing muzzles should be checked daily, however, to ensure they are not rubbing the skin and causing sores. If a rubbed area is found, adjust the muzzle and recheck it the following day. Be sure to inspect under the noseband of the halter, as the weight of the muzzle can sometimes cause chafing on the bridge of the nose. If the muzzle is not rubbing other areas, a fleece tube with a Velcro enclosure can be laid over the noseband, and the loops of the muzzle can then be fastened over the fleece-covered noseband.

Owners should monitor the weight of their horses carefully. With access to calorie-dense pasture grasses, winter grain meals may have to be reduced or cut out altogether.



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Depending on the amount of work the horse is asked to do, an all-purpose vitamin and mineral supplement pellet (Micro-Phase, Kentucky Performance Products, 1-800-772-1988) may be the only supplemental feed pastured horses require. Horses in intense exercise or those with extreme energy needs (mares in late gestation or early lactation) may benefit from lush pasture and concentrate meals.

Pasture, Not Always a Fairyland

Unrestricted access to high-quality pasture has risks. The foremost danger is laminitis, commonly called founder. The mechanisms that produce laminitis are complex and thought to be centered on starch overload and, with some grass varieties, fluctuating sugar levels. Once a horse or pony has survived an initial bout with laminitis, it is more susceptible to relapses.

Colic is another springtime concern. Horses that remain on pasture continually from winter to spring will likely not have a problem with the changing nutrient dynamics of the grass. Colic is primarily a problem with horses that are placed abruptly on succulent pasture with no time for their digestive systems to adjust accordingly.

Lush grass may not be the only thing growing in your pastures; unwanted vegetation including poisonous plants may take root in fields, leaving horses vulnerable to their often lethal side effects. Horses will generally bypass poisonous plants when more palatable plants are available, so few noxious plants are ingested in well-tended spring pastures. If a summer drought should set in and pasture quality diminishes, horsemen may find their equine companions nibbling on some unusual flora. If poisonous plants are thought to be growing in a pasture, horses should be removed from the area until plants can be completely eradicated. A pasture management expert such as an Extension agronomist can help owners canvass fields for unwanted plants and offer advice on the application of safe, appropriate herbicides.

Don't Forget Salt and Water

Horses must continue to have access to fresh water during periods of turnout. This is particularly important as spring segues into summer and the chance of dehydration, even in idle horses, increases.

Water tubs should be dumped, scrubbed, and refilled often so algae does not accumulate and mosquitoes and other insects do not have the opportunity to lay eggs. The bowls of automatic waterers should be scoured frequently, too.

In addition to free-choice access to water, a salt block should be available for consumption by horses at any time.



Free access to salt blocks is especially important in hot, humid weather.

White salt blocks (which contain sodium and chloride) and reddish-brown salt blocks (often called trace-mineralized blocks, which include sodium, chloride, and several trace minerals) are the best choices for horses. Feed stores often carry blue salt blocks, which possess a significant amount of cobalt. These blue licks are manufactured for cattle, as they have a greater need for cobalt than horses. Though the blue blocks will not harm horses, plain white blocks will likely be less expensive and will satisfy the salt requirements of all horses and ponies.

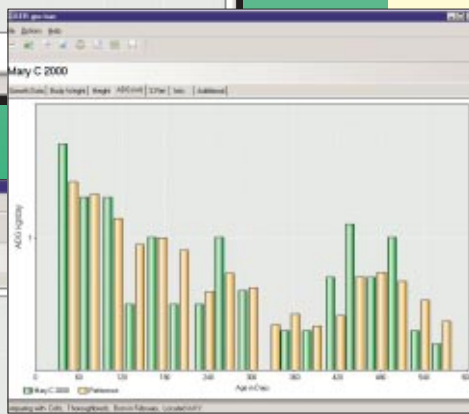
For horses that sweat considerably from exercise during spring and summer, oral electrolyte supplementation may be in order. For more information on electrolytes, check out the article titled "Pass the Salt, Please" in this issue.

As spring wears on, riders everywhere will be spending more time in the saddle. By employing a few safety precautions, horses and horsemen alike can enjoy the beauty and bounty of spring. ☺

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