Equinews Q & A

Q

How much water does an average horse drink? My retired gelding has access to water at all times, yet it seems as though he rarely drinks from the buckets in his stall. He spends an equal measure of time in a stall and at pasture.

A

The amount of water consumed by horses and ponies varies. Horsemen often use an old rule of thumb to determine water intake: one gallon for every 100 pounds of body weight. Using this as a guide, an average 1,200-pound gelding would consume 12 gallons of water per day. Research indicates this estimate may be slightly exaggerated. For those horses that do little to no work and consume primarily dry forage such as hay, water intake was measured at .3 to .8 gallons per day per 100 pounds of body weight.

Various factors affect thirst including diet, degree of work, climate, and general health of the horse. If your horse has access to lush pasture, which may contain 60-80% moisture, for half the day, he is likely receiving adequate water from the grass. This may account for his lack of interest in the water available to him in his stall.

Ease your fears about your gelding's water consumption by ensuring he has access to fresh water at all times. As long as water is available to him, he will drink sufficiently.

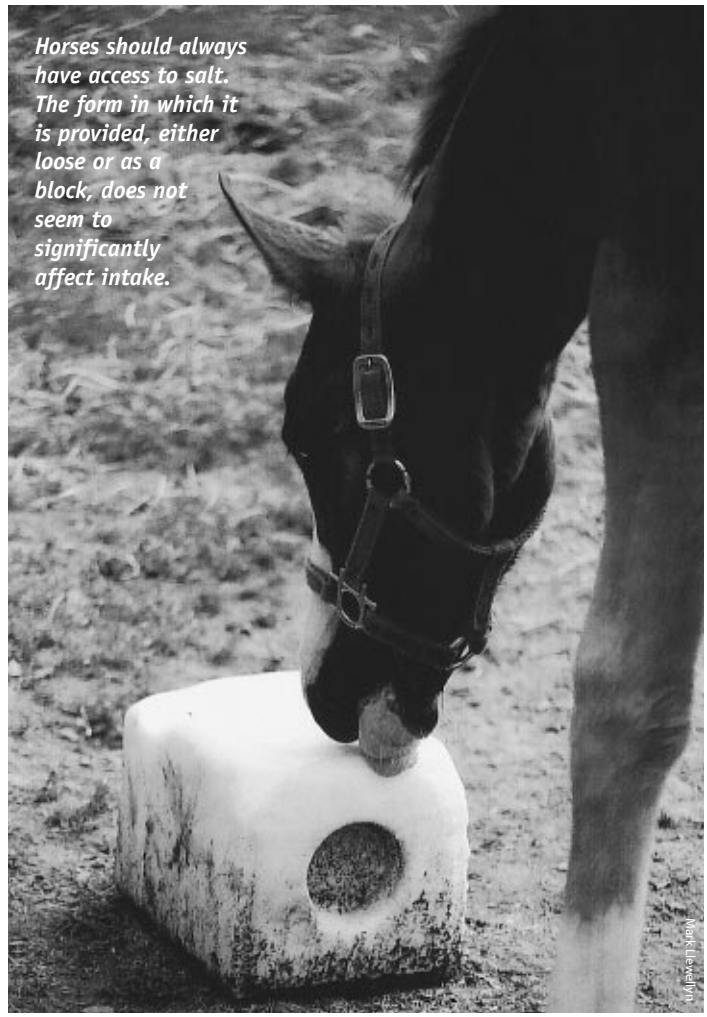
Q

Is there any difference in the amount of salt consumed when horses are given a choice between a salt block and loose salt? Is one better than the other?

A

Voluntary salt intake among horses has not been researched extensively. A study conducted by Kentucky Equine Research measured the intake of loose and block salt and evaluated how salt intake affects water consumption. Results of the trial indicated that salt intake was more consistent from week to week when horses were offered a block, though total consumption of the loose form was greater. Water consumption was significantly increased when horses were given access to loose salt.

Horsemen typically prefer to offer salt blocks to horses because they are easier to maintain. By placing a large block in a pasture or a small brick in a stall, horses have immediate access to it, and it's easy for caretakers to tell when a block must be replaced. Loose salt, on the other hand, requires more management. In outdoor feeding situations, loose salt must be placed in an easily accessible, covered feeder. The salt should be checked often and more added when necessary. In stalls, a separate bucket or corner feeder must be used to supply loose salt.



Horses should always have access to salt. The form in which it is provided, either loose or as a block, does not seem to significantly affect intake.

Mark Llewellyn

Q

I own a farm that has two pastures that are approximately four acres each. How many horses can I graze in each pasture without having to worry about ruining the plant life?

A

The number of horses allowed to graze a parcel of land is called the stocking rate. Optimal stocking rate is contingent upon numerous factors including grazing behavior, level of pasture management, forage species, seasons, and weather patterns.

Grazing behavior plays a pivotal role in deciding how many horses can graze a certain piece of land. Horses prefer young plants because they are usually more succulent and tasty. Immature vegetation also offers more nutrients than older, taller plants. As such, horses will often graze pastures spottily, causing conspicuous areas of short and long forage (called lawns and roughs, respectively). In places of congregation, such as in the vicinity of feed troughs, waterers, gates, and shelters, horses may trample and destroy all forages. These barren patches are called sacrificial areas.

Pasture management includes mowing, fertilizing, reseeding, and weed control. Timely maintenance of pastures can boost stocking rate. One important aspect of pasture management is selection of hardy forages. Plants conducive to high stocking rates should be productive over a long growing season, should grow aggressively, and should not be hindered by high traffic. Because no single species of forage meets all of these criteria, a combination of grasses and legumes will provide the highest yields and the greatest variety in diet.

Time of year and weather patterns affect stocking rate. More horses can benefit from a forage stand in times of high production such as during a flush of growth in the spring. As spring and summer progress, forage production may decrease and reduce the stocking rate of a pasture. Slow or arrested plant growth, such as that caused by drought, could limit stocking rate significantly.

Considering these factors, the stocking rate for properly tended pastures in temperate climates is one to three acres per horse. A four-acre pasture could easily withstand the grazing of one or two horses. If the pasture is managed intensely or if grazing time is limited, it may be able to offer sufficient forage to sustain three horses.


Mark Llewellyn

Though corn oil is a popular feed additive, horsemen can get the same benefits from a high-fat stabilized rice bran such as Equi-Jewel.


Mark Llewellyn

Deciding how many horses can graze on a certain allotment of land depends on numerous factors, including season, type of forage, and pasture management.

Q I've seen a few of my friends feed their performance horses corn oil. Why are they doing this?

A Vegetable or plant oils are usually given to performance horses for one of two reasons: to increase the energy density of the diet and(or) to try to improve coat condition.

Because corn oil is chock full of calories, owners can increase energy intake easily by drizzling up to two cups per day over two or more grain meals. Oil is also used frequently to decrease the amount of feed needed to fuel exercise. As corn oil consumption increases, feed intake may decrease. Thus, corn oil is a safe, effective alternative to high-grain diets.

Much anecdotal evidence exists regarding the use of vegetable oil to add shine and luster to the horse's coat. Some horsemen swear by its use.

Vegetable oil is not the only way to feed fat to horses, but it surely is the messiest. If dumping oil becomes too much of a hassle, horse owners should investigate other alternatives such as Equi-Jewel, a high-fat rice bran supplement available in meal or pelleted form. Research has shown that Equi-Jewel may be more appropriate than corn oil for equine athletes.

Do you have a question you'd like answered by one of KER's nutritionists? Send your question to Equinews Question and Answer, c/o Kentucky Equine Research, 3910 Delaney Ferry Road, Versailles, KY 40383, or mllewellyn@ker.com.

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3910 Delaney Ferry Road
Versailles, KY 40383
Phone: 859-873-1988
Fax: 859-873-3781
Order Department: 888-873-1988
www.ker.com
info@ker.com