

Equine Q & A—What's a Good Diet for a Good-Doer?

My lower-level dressage horse, a ten-year-old warm-blood gelding, is a good-doer. Each day he receives five pounds of sweet feed and 10 to 15 pounds of grass hay while he is stalled. He is given free access to good-quality pasture for twelve hours daily. He's way too fat and lazy! What can I do to slim him down?

Middle-aged warmblood geldings are notoriously easy keepers. This is great news for your pocketbook! But, as you know, it may not be so good for your psyche, as you watch him pack on those unwanted pounds. Don't fret, there's hope.

First, you should consider reducing the amount of sweet feed your gelding receives or eliminating it entirely from his diet. Yes, it provides him with essential vitamins and minerals, but that mixture of cereal grains and molasses also contributes significantly to his overall calorie intake. In order for him to lose weight, you must remove sources of unnecessary calories in your gelding's diet. So, the sweet feed must be given out more sparingly or done away with entirely.

The importance of vitamins and minerals, however, cannot be discounted. To ensure he ingests these essential nutrients, an all-purpose vitamin and mineral supplement should be fed if grain is fed at levels below those recommended or if grain is not fed at all. Assuming they are well-formulated, these supplements, usually pelleted and quite palatable, will provide your gelding with sufficient nutrients to thrive.

Because forage is the foundation on which all equine diets are built, it's important to take stock of the gelding's hay and pasture consumption. The horse's digestive system is designed to digest small amounts of forage on a near-continual basis. Therefore, you're doing right by his digestive tract by tossing him good-quality hay during his hours of stall confinement. And you get high marks for choosing grass hay, as legume hays such as alfalfa will only add further calories to his diet.

Another source of unwanted calories in your gelding's diet is his pasture intake. You mention that he spends half of each day on pasture. Fresh grass, particularly in the spring, is often responsible for weight gain in healthy horses, whether they're active or sedentary.

To curb your gelding's pasture intake, you should consider outfitting him with a grazing muzzle. This piece of equipment will allow him to graze, but it severely limits

the amount of grass consumed in each mouthful. Be sure to take the time to adjust the muzzle properly, as an ill-fitting muzzle may cause sores.

As an alternative to using a grazing muzzle, you can restrict the amount of time your gelding spends on pasture, allowing him instead to loaf around in a drylot or other turnout area that is free of calorie-laden vegetation. If you choose to do this, be sure that he has grass hay to munch on whenever he chooses.

By implementing a few management techniques, you can help your gelding fight the battle of the bulge. Though he will undoubtedly disapprove of his new diet, you are certainly doing the right thing by controlling his calorie consumption. Not only will he be a more willing partner when you ride, but his health will improve, too!

My jumper sweats heavily when I work him in the middle of the day. Unfortunately, early morning or late evening rides aren't an option. Is he receiving adequate electrolytes in his diet?

High-quality forage and salt blocks offer horses at maintenance (those that do little or no work) sufficient electrolytes, but hardworking horses require oral electrolyte supplementation for optimal performance. If your horse is sweating profusely on a daily basis, he should receive an electrolyte preparation designed especially for performance horses.

Many electrolyte preparations are available, but there are considerable differences among them. For the equine athlete, an appropriate electrolyte should contain sodium, chloride, and potassium, for these are the electrolytes lost in greatest quantity in sweat. An electrolyte that also contains calcium and magnesium is recommended to prevent metabolic disturbances. Read the label carefully to be sure useful amounts of critical electrolytes will be supplied.

A word of caution: electrolytes should be administered only when your horse has water available to him, as both electrolytes and water are necessary to maintain optimal fluid balance. ☺☺

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