

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

My gelding has been out of work all winter. I will put him back into training in late March or early April. Right now, he's maintaining his weight on 20-25 pounds of orchardgrass hay and approximately six pounds of sweet feed daily. He has access to pasture 12 hours a day, but the grass is essentially dormant. What is the best way to increase my horse's energy intake as I begin exercising him in the spring?

Mother Nature may boost your horse's energy intake!


Springtime offers nutritional perks for all horsemen. One involves the caloric contribution of fresh forage (pasture) that might be available to your horse. If your horse is allowed unrestricted access to lush pasture, he may require no more, and perhaps less, concentrate (sweet feed in your case) than he is currently consuming. Though you did not describe your horse's metabolism (easy keeper vs. hard keeper), many easy keepers can maintain their weight on forage alone, particularly if their diets include spring pasture. If you must cut back on the amount of concentrate you're feeding your horse, do not neglect the importance of vitamin and mineral supplementation. Forages do not provide horses with complete vitamin and mineral fortification for optimal performance; therefore, a concentrated source of these nutrients should be fed. Most well-stocked feed stores carry these low-calorie, concentrated feeds.

Your eyes and hands constitute important tools in monitoring your horse's weight. If he has a woolly winter coat, be sure to feel for his ribs. As more work is added to his routine, does it appear as though he is losing weight?

If a change in his diet is in order, it must be done gradually. Many people believe, erroneously, that the only way to add energy to the diet is through increased amounts of concentrate. In keeping with a diet most similar to that found in nature, attention might be turned to the forage first and the concentrate second. Because you are feeding orchardgrass hay presently, you can increase calorie consumption by switching to a mixed hay (a combination of grass and legume, normally alfalfa, plants). Pure alfalfa contains more energy than grass or mixed hays, assuming all are of equal quality. Slowly accustom your horse to the richer hay by increasing the amount given and decreasing the amount of grass hay each day. The changeover should take a week or ten days to accomplish.

If higher quality forage doesn't achieve the desired weight gain after several weeks, increase the amount of concentrate fed, referring to the manufacturer's feeding directions. Be aware that horses should not be fed over

five pounds of concentrate in one feeding. If the amount given to your horse is approaching this limit, consider feeding more meals per day. Alternatively, a high-fat supplement such as vegetable oil or rice bran can be given. These should be added gradually to the ration, too.

Once again, your horse will let you know if and when he requires a change in his diet. If he is burning more calories than he is consuming, he will eventually drop weight. The measures described above will help counteract weight loss. If he is consuming more calories than he is expending (which is possible if fresh pasture is available), he may gain weight. If this is the case, a muzzle or restricted access to pasture or a change in concentrate may be necessary. 

An increase in groceries may not be necessary for horses that return to full work in the springtime. When access to high-quality pasture is available, horses, especially good doers, will find the extra calories they require in succulent grasses. In fact, owners may want to be sure horses don't become too pudgy as winter segues into spring and summer.





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