

I own an 11-year-old Hanoverian that I show in jumper classes. Over the course of a couple of years, my trainer has recommended that my horse be given several nutritional supplements. When I prepare meals for my gelding, I am somewhat awestruck at the number of powders he receives, up to five different ones in his evening meal. Who should I go to for advice when it comes to providing supplements to my gelding?

You bring to the table an important topic in equine nutrition: oversupplementation. Most horse owners want their horses to receive the best possible care, even if this dictates that diets be augmented with nutritional supplements. First, you should realize that there is nothing inherently wrong with many of the nutritional supplements on the market today. Several fill critical voids in the nutritional profile. For instance, a well-formulated vitamin and mineral supplement might be perfect for an easy keeper that easily maintains his weight on only mid-quality forage. Other products target specific problems and these, too, are quite useful.

Problems occur, as you allude to, when individuals not well-versed in nutrition are making decisions about a horse's diet. While owners and caretakers may think they're doing what is most beneficial for the horse, feeding too many supplements can backfire.

One of the most widespread problems with supplementation is the provision of excessive amounts of nutrients. This problem can snowball quickly, particularly when multiple supplements are given over an extended period. Consider minerals, for example. When nutritionists formulate feeds, they know well the ins and outs of mineral digestibility, including the various interactions that occur among minerals in the body. With this knowledge, they are able to determine how much of each mineral should be supplied in the daily ration to meet the horse's needs without setting up a potentially harmful overload. If a concentrate is fed according to the directions on the feed bag, the horse receives appropriate mineral nutrition for its stage of life and workload. As supplements are added, however, the nutritional profile of that ration changes, sometimes considerably. If sufficient products are heaped into a ration, problems may ensue.

Aside from the health of the horse, oversupplementation is expensive. In this day and age, most equine athletes can benefit from supplementation at one time or another. Electrolyte preparations, for instance, are appropriate for horses that sweat on a near-daily basis. On the other hand, a horse doing light work in a cool climate may not need an electrolyte preparation. The cost of supplementation can skyrocket as more and more products are given, with some horsemen actually spending more money on nutritional supplements than they do on a well-formulated concentrate. As mentioned previously, these expenditures may be totally unnecessary.

Equine nutritionists are the go-to individuals anytime a question concerning your horse's diet arises. Those nutritionists at the forefront of research can conduct a thorough nutritional evaluation of your horse's diet and tell you exactly what your horse requires and what, if anything, is missing or being fed in excess. The opinion of the veterinarian that oversees the health of your horse is a critical component of a nutritional evaluation, and that opinion can offer valuable insight into certain medical conditions that might affect nutritional status. Therefore, collaboration among the nutritionist, the veterinarian, the caretaker, and the owner is the best possible scenario in deciding what nutritional supplements your horse actually needs.

If you would like to submit a nutrition question, please contact Eileen Phethean at ephethean@ker.com or mail to: EQUESTRIAN Nutrition Questions, c/o Kentucky Equine Research, 3910 Delaney Ferry Road, Versailles, KY 40383.