

With the price of horse feed at an all-time high, I am considering putting my small herd of Arabians back on a diet of oats and orchard grass hay this winter. I have a couple of show horses, a pregnant broodmare, and a few youngsters. Any danger in this?

The short answer to your question is yes. Be forewarned that you will be providing your horses with sustainable energy, not optimal nutrition, and there may be undesirable consequences to this decision.

Well-formulated commercial feeds are created with certain classes of horses in mind. A line of feeds might, for instance, contain a product for every stage of growth and reproduction as well as several for different types of performance. When fed according to the manufacturer's recommendations, these feeds provide the appropriate amount of energy, protein, vitamins, and minerals. Ultimately, these feeds make the lives of horse owners easier.

Some naysayers might be shaking their heads in disagreement, thinking to themselves that surely a generous diet of oats and high-quality orchard grass hay would sufficiently nourish a growthy weanling, a broodmare at the tail-end of her pregnancy, even a racehorse in training.

Yes, such a diet might keep the horses in acceptable body condition, but it will not provide these horses with *optimal* nutrition. Therefore, it's likely the young horse will not grow to reach its optimal size or soundness; it's likely the late-gestation broodmare will not have optimal nutrient stores to properly nourish her foal; and it's likely the equine athlete will not have optimal nutrient reserves to fuel performance and recovery after exercise.

For example, a diet of oats and orchard grass hay is deficient in lysine, an amino acid that is essential for development of bone and muscle. Lysine is *the* growth-limiting amino acid, which means that when an inadequate amount is consumed by weanlings and yearlings, growth may be adversely affected. Just as lysine is underrepresented in this example, other nutrients might be deficient when certain classes of horses are fed straight grains or commercial feeds not intended for them.

If commercial feed is not an option, one modification that might help balance a ration is a grain balancer supplement which contains concentrated levels of protein, minerals, and vitamins. Should you decide to go this route, consult with an equine nutritionist, as not all balancer supplements are of the same quality.

Though horse owners might not see horse feed prices decrease to previous levels, there is hope that prices will relax soon. Until then, it's important to not decrease the level of nutrition that you're offering your horses. This holds doubly true for horses with increased nutritional demands because of growth, pregnancy, lactation, or work.

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