

Many years have passed since I have raised foals, but this year I have three to wean in the coming months. I have heard that free-choice creep feeding of foals prior to weaning is no longer fashionable. True?

Creep feeding, a feeding system that ensures mares do not consume concentrate meant for the foals, is still practiced, but there have been changes in how much and what type of feed is offered in the creep feeder.

Years ago the all-they-can-eat approach to creep feeding was commonplace. Horsemen would offer foals as much concentrate as they would consume in an attempt to induce maximal growth. One obvious peril of this approach included overconsumption, which would sometimes lead to accelerated growth and its associated problems such as contracted tendons. Aside from growth and soundness issues, certain foals would become too fat. Young horses should be kept in moderate body condition, as extra weight places unnecessary stress on the dynamic musculoskeletal system. In addition, constant access to feed could be detrimental to gastrointestinal function. Some foals might consume far more feed than is healthy for optimal digestion.

Most well-formulated feeds intended for growing horses on the market today have feeding rates that are much more reasonable and healthy. Generally, foals and weanlings are offered about one pound daily per month of age. A six-month-old weanling would consume six pounds of feed each day, ideally split into two meals. The smaller meal size increases the likelihood that the nutrients will be properly processed in the gastrointestinal tract.

Perhaps even more important than how much feed is being offered to young horses is the type of feed. The source of energy for young horses should be evaluated, as hyperglycemia or hyperinsulinemia have been implicated in the development of osteochondrosis when certain young horses are fed high-starch concentrates.

In a large-scale field trial conducted by Kentucky Equine Research, the effects of typical concentrates on glycemic response were measured on more than 200 Thoroughbred weanlings. A glycemic response test was carried out on each weanling after it was fed a meal of traditional concentrate. A single blood sample was taken two hours after feeding to determine glucose and insulin levels. A high glucose and insulin response to a concentrate meal was associated with an increased incidence of osteochondrosis. Though more research is needed to substantiate the link between high-starch feeds and osteochondrosis, many feed manufacturers offer feeds that contain less starch and more fat and fiber to meet energy demands.

One goal of feeding young horses is to keep growth at an even pace, thus avoiding any significant growth slowdowns or spurts. This can be achieved by monitoring body condition on a regular basis and evaluating the diet with a professional equine nutritionist.

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.