



HOW MUCH SHOULD I FEED MY HORSE?

As equine nutrition consultants, one of the main questions we get regularly is, “How much should I feed?”. One answer to this would be to look at your feed tag, which will allow you to match your horse’s weight with its activity level and give you an amount in kilograms that you should be feeding per day. Once someone reads this amount it often leads to one of the most common comments we get as feed consultants. “I can’t feed my horse that much! That is way too much feed!” Depending on your horse, we may agree with you on that.

GENERAL CALCULATION OF THE FEEDING

By feeding your horse a feed in addition to forage, we are trying to achieve two different, but equally important things simultaneously:

1. Meet your horse’s **daily caloric requirements** to maintain a healthy body condition
2. Meet your horse’s **vitamin and mineral requirements**, based on size, life stage and activity level.

The challenge with this is that two horses of the same weight and activity level will have the same vitamin and mineral requirements, but they don’t necessarily have the same energy requirements. Let’s look into this a little bit deeper.

1. **Daily Caloric Requirements:**

Metabolism levels vary from horse to horse just as they vary from person to person. Some people can eat pasta and dessert every day and stay slim while others need to stick to salads to stay the same size. It’s the same as the Thoroughbred that is getting three 2.5 kilogram meals per day and barely has its ribs covered versus the Canadian that gets fat off air and has to wear a grazing muzzle. These differences in metabolism go back to genetics. Thoroughbreds have been bred over the years to be finely tuned racing machines. With that comes a high-strung animal that is always alert, always thinking, always moving and always stressed. All of these actions require energy. Therefore, you may be giving him three meals a day to try to put a layer of fat over those ribs but he uses most of it just pacing his paddock and stressing. On the other hand, that Canadian was bred to be versatile and ready for any situation. He was bred to work for a living and have the endurance to work all day long while being level headed and trustworthy in any situation. This horse doesn’t stress about things and usually requires slower energy over a longer period of time. His metabolism burns slower and steadier and converts every calorie efficiently.

2. **Vitamin and Mineral Requirements:**

Horses of the same size, activity level and life stage will have the same vitamin and mineral requirements, even if they have different metabolisms. When formulating a feed, we have to include vitamin and minerals at a specific level, and are therefore included at a rate that will meet the requirements of harder keeping horses that must consume higher rates of feed to maintain weight.

Let’s look at why that is:

If we formulated a feed to meet the vitamin and mineral requirements of that easy keeping Canadian only eating 1kg of feed per day, the hard keeping Thoroughbred requiring 5kg per day would be getting 5 times the vitamins and minerals he needs! Over feeding certain vitamins and minerals over long periods of time is not ideal, and can lead to toxicity issues. Therefore, we need to formulate the feed to meet the needs of harder keeping horses, who require larger quantities.

SO, HOW MUCH DO I FEED MY HORSE?

You can now picture two very different horses that need very different amounts of energy in order to remain in good body condition, but we know that both horses still have the same vitamin and mineral requirements. So how much do you feed each horse?

Our answer is “feed to body condition.” Body condition is the term we use for the amount of fat stored in the body. Horses make it easy for us to judge body condition; their fat is mostly stored subcutaneously which means it is right under the skin, easy for you to see and feel. In the equine industry we use the Henneke Body Condition Scoring Chart, which was developed in the 1980s by Dr. Don Henneke of Texas A&M University. This chart is a grading system from 1-9, 1 being extremely emaciated and 9 being extremely fat. The ideal body condition score can vary dependent on the life stage of the horse. For example an average maintenance horse should usually be a 5 where a broodmare may be more comfortable as a 6 to ensure fertility and conception and a foal should be more like 4.5 – 5 to prevent growth problems.

The best way to judge a horse’s body condition is to use your hands and NOT your eyes. Using your eyes alone can be extremely deceiving. Conformation, muscling and body type will fool your eyes into thinking a horse is lighter or heavier than it is, but your fingers won’t lie. As stated above, horses store their fat subcutaneously, which makes it easy to find. Key places where horses tend to store fat are the crest of the neck, the withers, behind the shoulder, the crease along the croup, the tail head and over the ribs. When evaluating body condition make sure to take an objective approach. Palpate all of the above areas with your hands to get a good idea of the horse, most importantly the ribs. Ribs are the easiest location to judge stored fat because there is never muscle over the ribs. If you see the ribs there is not enough fat, and if you can’t even feel them your horse is too fat. Key points to remember are that a hay belly is not fat. A hay belly is exactly that, undigested hay. Also, don’t let conformation fool you, a tall horse with a narrow frame will look thinner than a muscular Quarter Horse, but the Quarter Horse could easily have the lower body condition. That is why it is so important to make sure to get your hands on the horse and feel.

Once you have judged your horse’s body condition you can now properly answer the question of how much to feed. If your horse has too low of a body condition score, you need to feed it more. If your horse has too high of a body condition score, you need to feed less. And if your horse has a good body condition score, you are probably feeding about the right amount.

The complicated part comes after you have figured out the amount of feed, because remember from above, the feeding rate from your feed tag ensures that your horse will receive its daily requirements for vitamins and minerals. *This means that any horse eating less than this recommended amount will be lacking vitamins and minerals.* If you are the owner of the Canadian mentioned above, he may have a body score of 6 to 8 by only eating hay, this horse will be deficient in vitamins and minerals unless a supplement is provided. Even good quality hay will not meet all of the requirements of a horse. In many parts of Canada, especially Eastern Canada, our soil has little to no selenium which means neither does our pasture or hay. Also, vitamins oxidize in hay after a short time and minerals are very dependent on soil quality, year and time of harvest, field location etc.

So the next time you start wondering, “How much should I feed?” Take off your gloves, get your hands on your horse’s body and take an objective evaluation of its body condition. Decide if the feed tag’s

recommended feeding rate is realistic for your horse, and if your horse requires less than what is recommended, balance it out with a ration balancer. The horses that achieves a high body condition score on hay and a handful or cup of feed technically don't need any feed and should be fed only a ration balancer. The key is to make sure that you remain fully objective during your evaluation. Deciding how much to feed should not be a complicated mathematical process, simply let the horse tell you.

THE PURINA ADVICE

When feeding less than the recommended feeding rates, a well-balanced ration balancer is essential in ensuring your horse receives the adequate amount of vitamins and minerals each day without adding unnecessary calories. At Purina, we have designed *Equilizer* and *Optimal*, for the specific purpose of balancing our feeds. The same level of vitamins and minerals can be found in 200 grams of *Equilizer* or 300 grams of *Optimal* as in 1 kg of most of our feeds with very few calories. This enables a horse owner to be able to read the feed tag of the Purina feed they are using to see what the recommended feeding rate is for their horse. Then, if their horse's body condition suggests they should feed less than the recommended amount they can easily add 200 grams of *Equilizer* or 300 grams of *Optimal* for every 1 kg under that recommended amount that they are feeding. This combination makes it possible to feed to the horse's body condition but still be able to meet the horse's requirements for vitamins and minerals.

For additional advice on how to balance your horse's diet for vitamins and minerals, consult your local Purina Equine Nutrition Consultant, or one of our consultant at Purina Connect.

Purina Connect

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