

# Horse Feeding: Best Feed & Grain for Horses



Horses need a balanced diet of high-quality hay, alfalfa, oats or grains, and vitamins and minerals. Whether you have a high-performance horse, a pregnant mare, foals or a breeding stallion, tailoring a horse's diet to their purpose will keep them performing at their top level.

## Horse food and supplements

Horses are herbivores, and their natural diet is pasture grass and tender plants. The best horse feeds provide them with the protein, carbohydrates, fiber, vitamins and minerals they need. Some feeds are designed to be the primary food of a horse's diet, while other feeds are designed to provide horses eating hay, grass or different types of forage with the extra protein and energy they need to round out their nutrition.

A healthy horse diet is augmented with supplements. Supplements provide animals with the extra minerals, vitamins and other compounds they may require.

### What do horses eat?

The elements of a basic horse diet typically consist of:

- Pasture: Grass is the natural choice for horses, and they graze when given access to a pasture
- Hay: For horses with no access to a pasture, hay is the next best choice for horse food
- Grains: Some old, young, nursing, pregnant and competing horses have additional energy needs which are best met by feeding them grains, such as oats
- Concentrates: These contain a mixture of grains, flaxseed, molasses, bran, vitamins and minerals designed to meet any shortfalls of a horse's diet
- Commercial horse food: Some commercial foods help meet the complete nutritional needs of a horse, while others are used to balance a horse's diet
- Fruits and vegetables: Produce is a nice treat and supplement to a healthy diet. Avoid nightshades and foods in the cabbage family
- Salt: A salt block or loose salt is a favorite of horses, especially in the summer

### Hay and pasture for bulk and roughage

Horse's eating habits start with grazing, where they eat small amounts of roughage regularly and continually. Twenty-four-hour access to pasture or hay is preferred, but if this isn't practical, supply a minimum of 1% equivalent of the horse's body weight in good quality roughage. Horses should be fed as often as possible and no less than two or three times per day. Knowing the protein level of your roughage source can also help you properly balance your horse's diet.

### Grains for energy

Grains are sometimes needed to boost the energy and protein in a horse's diet. Balance the protein content of your horse's grain mix with the protein level of the selected roughage to ensure their protein-to-calorie ratio is maintained within acceptable limits.

To know a horse's grain needs, assess their body condition. Horses eating a healthy diet have ribs covered with a layer of fat but can be easily felt, and their topline—the span from the back of the neck to the rear—should appear fairly flat when viewed from the side.

### **Protein, fat and fiber from horse food**

The daily amount of protein and amino acids a horse's diet requires depends on their age, weight, growth rate, breed, health, metabolic rate and environmental conditions. The best horse feeds are designed to have the right amount of protein, fat and fiber for a particular animal. High-quality horse food specifically formulated for your horse's life stage and activity level is the best option.

Alfalfa hay has more protein than regular hay. A horse eating alfalfa hay as bulk likely needs a grain mix with a lower protein content. Avoid feeding young, growing horses an excess amount of protein, as it's associated with certain types of developmental orthopedic disease.

### **Minerals from fortified horse food**

Do not haphazardly supplement individual minerals to a horse's diet, since many minerals can cause more harm than good. A fortified horse food fed according to the label's directions is a good way to ensure you're meeting your horse's mineral requirements.

### **Vitamins from a micro-nutrient**

A mature, healthy horse eating feedstuffs can often meet their vitamin requirements via intestinal synthesis or metabolic synthesis. Young horses, performance horses, or horses under significant stress due to disease, environment or temperament may require vitamin supplements.

If you provide vitamin supplements, your horse will also require mineral supplements. The best solution is often a micronutrient supplement that contains both minerals and vitamins.

### **Horse treats**

What do horses like to eat? Treats! Apple slices and carrots are traditional favorites, but celery, bananas, and pumpkin are also popular. Commercially made horse treats are another good option, especially when traveling. Remember to consider a treat's place in a horse's diet—too many can pack on unwanted weight.

## **Water for a horse**

Make fresh water available at all times. A horse's average water consumption is approximately 10 to 15 gallons per day, and working horses or lactating mares may consume as much as 30 gallons or more within 24 hours. Water deficiency will get a horse into serious trouble faster than any other dietary problem.

Horses competing in long-distance events need access to drink when they are on the move. When the ride is completed, let them cool off before giving them free access to water.

## **How to feed a horse**

Horse food comes in three forms (or a combination of the forms):

- Pelleted feed has the ingredients milled and formed into pellets
- Sweet feed is in the form of fresh grains plus pellets
- Block feed has the ingredients milled and formed into solid blocks

Equine minerals come in two forms:

- Loose minerals can be offered by a separate mineral feeder or added to feed just as people can put salt on food
- Block minerals are solid blocks that the animals lick

Ask yourself the following questions when determining what type of feed your horse needs:

- What is the activity level of your horse? People often overestimate the activity level. How many times a week do you ride? How long do you ride? What type of riding do you do?
- What type of overall feeding program do you use? Does the horse feed on hay or pasture? Is the hay or pasture good enough quality to provide the fiber the horse needs in its diet?
- How old is the horse? Different horse foods are designed for the different life stages of a horse.
- Is the horse on a regular worming schedule? Every horse should be dewormed on a regular basis. A horse that has worms requires significantly more feed to meet its nutritional needs. Parasites such as worms steal nutrition from the horse and cause intestinal damage that interferes with nutrient absorption and makes the horse more susceptible to colic.
- Is the horse a "hard keeper" (i.e., has trouble keeping on weight) or an "easy keeper" (i.e., has an easy time keeping on weight)? Some horse foods are better at helping horses keep on weight.
- Do you feed the horse individually or in a group? With group feeding, a horse might get pushed aside by more dominant horses, making it difficult for the horse to get enough food. The best way to ensure horses get the food they need is to feed them individually in stalls.
- Do you feed inside or outdoors? For outdoors, a block feed (i.e., feed that comes in the form of a solid block) or the use of a feeder to hold the feed is superior to throwing feed on the ground.

## Q and A: Answers to the most frequently asked questions about horse care

**Question:** My horse has trouble gaining and keeping on weight. What can I do?

**Answer:** A "hard keeper" requires high-energy horse food to gain and keep on weight. Also, be sure the horse is on a sound deworming program and have a vet check its teeth. Parasites and/or poor teeth greatly reduce the nutrition a horse gets from its feed.

**Question:** Is there one feed I can use for both my horses and my cattle?

**Answer:** **Producer's Pride All Grain** can be fed to both horses and cattle. However, other products specifically designed for horses and for cattle will do a much better job at ensuring the animals get proper nutrition. Note: We do not advocate feeding corn to horses. Corn is very high in soluble starch and energy, and it's very easy to founder or colic a horse using straight corn.

**Question:** At what age should I consider my horse an older or senior horse?

**Answer:** A horse is considered older or senior when it is 16 years or older, though this varies from animal to animal. Horse food for seniors is specifically designed for the needs and conditions of older animals. A horse with a history of poor nutrition, high parasite loads, overwork, or abuse will be a senior horse much earlier than a horse that has been properly cared for.

**Question:** Do horses eat meat?

**Answer:** Horses do not eat meat. In fact, horses have delicate digestive systems that meat can disrupt.