



HORSE SOLUTIONS

5 steps to balancing your horse's diet

By Dr. Ed Bonnette, Companion Animal Nutritionist, Hubbard Feeds

Balance. Seems like a fairly straightforward concept, right? And yet, we always seem to be striving for more of it in our lives. We seek balance between our work and play. We are (hopefully!) balancing our bank accounts. And, of course, we are balancing our horses' farrier and vet appointments, along with their training and show schedules.

When it comes to our horses, the thing that often proves most difficult to balance is their feed and supplements. However, balancing your horse's feed may be easier than you think. These five simple steps can help you get on the right track:

1. Start with forage.

When it comes to feeding horses, lots of people stress out about grain, but in reality, the majority of your horse's diet should consist of hay.

Horses have evolved over millennia into fiber-digesting machines. Our job as stewards of domestic horses is to supply them with what they need to perform at their best, and this starts with forage.

Every horse — no matter their age or performance level — requires at least 1% of their bodyweight in forage per day in order for their digestive tract to continue functioning properly. This means that an average 1,000-pound horse requires a minimum of 10 pounds of hay per day. If you consider that a flake of grass hay is between 3 to 5 pounds, you are looking at two or three flakes of hay per day **at a minimum.**

A more accurate estimate of forage needs is between 1.5–2.0% of a horse's bodyweight — or, for an average horse, 15 to 20 pounds (four to six flakes) of hay per day.

While you may not necessarily need to do so on a daily basis, it is wise to weigh a few flakes of hay on your own so that you can become more aware of feeding by weight rather than by "flake."

2. Have your hay tested.

When evaluating your horse's diet, it is imperative that you have your hay tested in order to determine the levels of nutrients it provides. Since the bulk of a horse's diet is made up of hay, these nutrient levels are important to know.

Choose a quality hay that meets your horse's requirements by utilizing a hay test. For instance, if you have an overweight or insulin-resistant horse, you should choose a hay that is lower in non-structural carbohydrates and higher in fiber. This will provide your horse with the fiber necessary for hindgut function while also delivering minimal starches and sugars. On the other hand, a performance horse may require hay that is higher in carbohydrates and protein for weight management and adequate energy.

3. Choose the appropriate grain to fill in the gaps.

Once your hay is tested, you will easily be able to see which nutrient requirements in your horse's diet are not being met. This is where grain can help fill in the gaps.

In many cases, hay will not meet a horse's requirements 100% of the time; nutrient levels vary from flake to flake and from one section of pasture to the other. Hay will be different based on the time of day it was cut or whether or not fertilizers were used.

-continued on next page

HORSE SOLUTIONS

Often, a great way to start is by choosing a ration balancer, such as [Cool Command® Balancer 30](#), which supplies a horse's nutrient requirements at low feeding rates. If you want to feed your horse a "handful" of grain at night, if your horse is an easy-keeper, or if you have a horse at maintenance or in light work, a ration balancer may be the right choice. Ration balancers allow you to feed 1 to 2 pounds of grain per day and meet your horse's vitamin and mineral requirements without the extra calories, sugars and starches.

On the other hand, if you have a horse that is harder to keep weight on or that is in moderate to intense training, you will likely need to supply it with more calories, energy and healthy fats. In that case, you will be feeding about 5 to 7 pounds of grain per day to meet the horse's nutrient requirements. This is the time to consider a feed like [Summit® Active](#), which offers both highly digestible energy and high-quality protein for active horses.

4. Read feed tags and look for innovative ingredients

Feeds that embrace new technologies, such as probiotics and prebiotics, will allow your horse to utilize and absorb nutrients more efficiently. Some of our favorites include:

- [Yea-Sacc®](#): This specifically selected yeast culture allows the hindgut to work better for optimal fiber digestion so your horse can get every last drop of value from their hay.
- [Bio-Mos®](#): This prebiotic will help keep good bacteria at peak numbers while keeping bad bacteria in check.
- [Bioplex®](#): Organic trace minerals — including copper, zinc, manganese, cobalt and iron — are absorbed and utilized at significantly higher levels than the commonly used inorganic alternatives. Given that trace minerals are incredibly important for virtually every bodily function and system, this makes a huge difference in a horse's performance.
- [Sel-Plex®](#): Supplying your horse with 100% organic selenium is crucial for its antioxidant status, muscle recovery and immune function. Organic selenium is superior to the commonly used inorganic version because it can be absorbed at higher levels, making it more readily available for the horse's body to use.

5. Supplement and adjust as necessary based on your horse's performance throughout different stages of life

Just like us, horses' energy and nutrient needs will change based on their season of life (and sometimes the season of the year!). There may also be times that certain supplements, such as those offering joint support or increased fat, may be necessary based on the horse's level of training. Be willing to adjust as necessary to keep your horse's gut and immune systems functioning at their best.

While balance may be something that we humans are constantly searching for, don't fret too much about balancing your horse's diet. Simply following the steps outlined above will not only make your life easier — it will also help keep your horse happier and healthier.