
Top tips for feeding the competition horse



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Whether you're a seasoned competitor or preparing for your first unaffiliated show, good nutrition helps to support optimum health and performance. Here's a few tips to help you realise your horse's potential:

Don't underestimate the importance of forage

Okay so this one might sound like old news, but forage should be the foundation of every horse's diet and the performance horse is no exception. As well as being essential for digestive health and mental well-being, forage makes a significant contribution towards total daily energy intake.

- Ideally feed as much forage as your horse will eat while being mindful of excess waste.

- Total forage intake should not be restricted to less than 1.5% of current bodyweight on a dry matter basis – on average this equates to approximately 9kg of hay (11kg if you intend to soak it for 1 hour or more before feeding) or 11-12kg of haylage on ‘as fed’ basis (the amount you need to weigh out) for a 500kg horse without grazing.
- Feeding small amounts of forage or short chopped fibre prior to exercise helps to prevent ‘gastric splashing’.



Every horse is an individual

Regardless of your chosen discipline, the amount of energy (calories) in your horse’s diet should be adjusted according to their body condition. Balancers are a great way of supplying vitamins, minerals and amino acids (quality protein) to horses that maintain condition well on reduced rations of feed (some good doers in light work may maintain weight easily on forage alone!). When choosing the source of energy e.g., whether opting for a fibre and oil or cereal based feed, consider your horse’s temperament and clinical history. Providing a diet low in cereal starch (and sugar) plays a key role in managing horses prone to conditions such as gastric ulcers, colic and tying-up and helps to reduce the risk of feed related excitability.

Feed alone does not build muscle

The same is true for people – no matter how much lean meat you consume or how many protein shakes you drink, building muscle requires a considered gym effort (or lots of work around the yard!). That said, an appropriate diet provides the nutritional building blocks so it’s important to ensure your horse maintains a healthy body condition and receives suitable amounts of quality protein, particularly the essential amino acid lysine. It’s also impossible to turn fat into muscle so don’t allow your horse to gain excess weight in an attempt to build muscle or ‘topline’.



Feeding before exercise

The amount of time you need to leave between feeding and riding will depend on what you feed and how hard your horse will be working. Cereal based meals should not be given in the 3 hours before intense exercise but feeding small amounts of forage or chopped fibre helps to prevent gastric splashing.

Feeding after exercise

Appropriate feeding (and watering) post exercise helps to replace energy, water and electrolyte losses and provides amino acids to support muscle repair. Small amounts of forage can be offered immediately after exercise but ‘bucket feed’, particularly cereal based feed, should be withheld until the horse has cooled down fully and their respiration rate has returned to normal. Cereal based feeds should be reduced for horses having a few days rest to reduce the risk of unwanted excitability and tying up – as a guide, by half from the evening before to the evening after. High fibre, low starch feeds are less of a concern, even if they are high in energy although a gradual transition to a lower energy feed may be necessary for longer periods of rest or reduced work.



Avoid sudden or frequent changes

Some changes in diet may be inevitable, particularly for horses travelling abroad but frequent or sudden changes in feed and forage increase the risk of conditions such as colic and should be avoided as far as possible. Feeding for optimum performance and recovery begins long before the day of competition. In some cases, horses work harder during training than on the day of competition but regardless of whether or not this is the case, establishing an appropriate diet beforehand and resisting the temptation to make changes immediately before or after an event is key.

Water – the overlooked element of the diet

Dehydration can lead to poor performance and comes with a number of health risks. Allowing horses to drink immediately after exercise won't cause colic but withholding water may delay re-hydration which poses a number of health risks and may impair performance in those competing again following day. During high intensity exercise, horses rely heavily on muscle glycogen (stored glucose) for energy metabolism. Although it takes up to 72 hours for glycogen stores to be fully restored, replenishment will be slower in dehydrated horses.



Electrolytes

A lack or imbalance of electrolytes may lead to conditions such as heat stress, fatigue and synchronous diaphragmatic flutter (thumps), as well as some cases of tying-up. Electrolyte losses are linked to sweat loss – the more your horse sweats the more electrolytes they lose. Horses sweating regularly are likely to need some form of electrolyte replacement and in the majority of cases, salt (the same salt you put on your chips) is an effective and cost-effective solution. Check out our blog for more information or speak to a nutritionist for specific advice.

Supplement safety

More does not always equal better and is certainly true for vitamins and minerals, some of which can be harmful if over-supplied. Iron, selenium and iodine are of particular concern because they can be harmful in relatively small amounts and over-feeding supplements is the easiest way to come unstuck. Speak to a nutrition advisor for more advice.

Be NOPS savvy

Any competition horse can be tested for prohibited substances at any time so make sure you know the rules about liability. Making sure all feeds and supplements are BETA® NOPS approved is a key part of reducing the risk of a positive test but it doesn't stop there. Did you know that many human foods including tea and coffee, fizzy drinks, cakes, biscuits and sweets may contain naturally occurring prohibited substances (NOPS)? This means that eating or drinking in your horse's stable or feed room could lead to a positive test! BETA® offers a number of free advice resources on how to reduce the risk in all areas of the horse's management.

For more advice on feeding your competition horse contact the SPILLERS Care-Line.