Worried about winter weight loss?

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Winter can be a challenging time for the owners of poor doers, especially when it comes to keeping weight on. But don't worry, we're here to help. At SPILLERS, we've been supporting horse owners like you for over 65 years. In this article, we'll give an overview of practical feeding strategies and winter management tips to help your horse stay happy.

Read More: If you’re looking for a deeper dive into managing winter weight, check out our comprehensive SPILLERS Poor Doer and Underweight Horse Nutritional Guide.

Feed Forage First

Forage should be the foundation of your horse's diet. It’s fantastic for their digestive health and keeps them happily occupied. Plus, it's usually the major source of calories over the winter in particular!

Whenever possible, let your horse have as much forage as they'll eat. If they’re finishing their haynet every night, try giving them a bit more. It sounds simple, but it’s easy to get stuck in a routine and forget the obvious. Keep an eye on how much of the hay they are actually eating versus how much may be trampled into their bedding – for some horses feeding hay on the floor just leads to an excess of waste.

Some horses can be a bit picky. If yours isn't a big fan of hay, you could try offering haylage or a mix of the two. For some, forage replacers might be a good option. Remember to introduce any changes slowly.



Check Those Teeth

If your horse is eating less than usual, chewing slowly, quidding or seems at all uncomfortable, it might be time for a dental check-up. Dental issues are a common culprit for weight loss, especially in senior horses. For horses with significant dental problems, replacing some or all of their hay with a hay replacer might be necessary.

Also, make sure their worming program is up to date!

Understanding Calories

When we talk about calories, we're talking about energy – the same two words describe the same thing. In horse feeds, you'll see this labelled as ‘megajoules of digestible energy’ (MJ DE/kg). Feeds with 7-10 MJ DE/kg are considered 'low calorie', similar to typical forage levels. Feeds with 12-13 MJ DE/kg are considered 'high calorie'. For a horse who needs to gain or maintain weight, a higher-calorie feed is often a good choice. Feeds labelled as "conditioning" are an obvious go-to, but there might be even better options for your individual horse.

Read More: To demystify energy in equine diets, read our guide on The Truth About Calories(open in new tab).

Choosing the Right Energy Source

Energy in horse feed comes from fibre, oil, sugar, and starch. For horses who are naturally a bit sharp or excitable, look for feeds high in fibre and oil, which provide slow-release, non-heating energy. More laid-back types might benefit from some cereal in their diet for extra oomph but avoid this if your horse is prone to laminitis or gastric ulcers.

Are You Feeding Enough?

It's worth double-checking the feeding guide on your feed bag. Are you feeding the recommended amount? If not, gradually increase it and keep an eye on your horse's condition. **Remember to weigh your horse's feed!** Scoop sizes vary and different feeds will have different weights. As a golden rule, feed a maximum of 2kg per meal for a 500kg horse (less for ponies).

Make the Most of Chaff

Don't forget about the chaff! If you're using high-calorie cubes or mashes, pair them with a high-calorie, high-oil chaff. It can help maximise the calories in every mouthful and boost fibre intake.

Read More: For guidance on selecting the perfect high-quality fibre for your horse, take our interactive quiz: Which Fibre Should I Choose?(open in new tab)

Finding the right feed to safely build condition and topline without causing unwanted excitability is key. Here are our top-performing feeds designed specifically for weight gain and conditioning:

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Little and Often is Key

If two meals a day aren't quite enough, consider adding a small third meal at lunchtime or late in the evening. Splitting feeds into smaller, more frequent meals is more sympathetic on their digestive system. Horses are grazers after all and have evolved to eat little and often.

Sugar Beet and Mashes

Sugar beet is a winter classic for a reason – it's high in calories, low in starch, and a great source of digestible fibre. However, because it soaks to such a large volume (it's about 80% water once soaked), a scoop of soaked beet doesn't contain as many calories as it looks.

For instance, a scoop of horse and pony cubes could have five times more calories as it’s not full of water.

High-fibre mashes are a more modern popular choice. Many have added vitamins and minerals and are quicker to prepare. Regardless of which you choose, always weigh any soakable feeds *before* soaking so you know how much you're actually feeding.

Read More: Learn more about this winter classic with our comprehensive guide: 9 Sugar Beet Facts Every Horse Owner Should Know(open in new tab).

Using Oil for Extra Calories

Adding oil can be a great way to get more non-heating calories into the diet, especially for poor doers prone to issues like laminitis. However, you need to feed more than ‘a glug’ to make a calorific difference - 300ml of oil provides around the same calories as 1kg of oats. The trouble is many horses find this amount unpalatable and these high-oil diets also need to be balanced with extra vitamin E making it more complicated. Often, choosing a high-calorie feed that already includes a high level of oil is a simpler and more effective option.

Read More: Learn everything you need to know about integrating oil safely with our guide to Feeding Oil to Horses(open in new tab).

Tips for Fussy Eaters

- Offer them a buffet: If your horse has gone off their feed, try offering their different feeds in separate buckets. This helps you distinguish which feed they’re really rejecting and you may find they come back to feeds they previously refused.
- Add warm water: This is particularly useful for horses with sensitive teeth or seniors.
- Tempting toppings: Make meals more appealing by adding little apple juice, grated carrots, or try adding one of our delicious apple flavoured mashes.

Winter Management Ideas

- Body Condition Scoring (BCS): Regularly BCS your horse to accurately assess their condition. You'll feel changes before you see them.
- Rugging: Make sure your horse is rugged appropriately to avoid them using excess energy just to stay warm.
- Workload: If your horse is really struggling, consider reducing their workload to allow them a break to build condition.
- Behaviour: Watch for any changes that might signal pain, such as slower chewing, reluctance to eat/ work/ or behave as normal. Call the vet if at all concerned.

- Herd Dynamics: If your horse is in a group, ensure they aren't being bullied away from food or shelter.
- Plan Ahead: Be proactive! If your horse loses excess weight every winter start introducing a higher-calorie diet in the autumn before weight loss begins.

Tempting Fussy Eaters

- Try not to chop and change feeds as this can upset the digestive system. Instead offer buffet style meals with their different feeds in different buckets. Many come back to the feeds they go off, some simply don’t like different feeds and textures mixed together.
- Try adding warm water in winter - this can be a game changer for those with sensitive teeth.
- Consider adding small amounts of apple juice, grated apples/ carrots, garlic, mint or fenugreek to feeds. For those reluctant to eat soaked hay try adding flavoured tea bags to make the water taste better. Always consider the risk of prohibited substances if your horse is competing under affiliated rules.

A Couple of Myths Busted:

"*Balancers help with weight gain.*" Not usually. Balancers are fed in small amounts, so they don't provide many calories. They're designed to provide essential nutrients to help with general wellbeing.

"*Good feeding alone builds muscle.*" While quality protein is essential, consistent, appropriate work is the only way to build true muscle tone.

Need a Helping Hand?

Every horse’s journey to a healthy weight is different. If you are worried about your horse's weight, need help calculating feeding rates, or would like a completely tailored diet plan, our dedicated nutrition advisors are here to support you.

Get in touch with our **SPILLERS Care-Line on 01908 226626** or fill in our online consultation form for free, friendly, and expert advice.

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Author summary:
Vanessa has been part of the SPILLERS nutrition team for over a decade and writes evidence-based, practical feeding advice to help owners support their horses’ health, wellbeing and long-term condition.

Frequently Asked Questions

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1. **How do I know if my horse is a 'poor doer'?**

   A 'poor doer' is a horse who struggles to maintain a healthy body condition and often loses weight, especially during the winter months, despite receiving what seems to be an adequate diet. Regular body condition scoring can help you track this enabling you to make changes before it becomes a problem.

2. **My horse is fussy. How can I get them to eat more?**

   Try adding warm water to their feed, or tempt them with small amounts of grated carrot, apple. Try to work out exactly what it is they don’t enjoy eating by serving different feeds in separate buckets and avoid adding unpalatable supplements.

3. **Is it better to add oil to my horse's feed or use a conditioning feed?**

   While adding oil provides non-heating calories, it can be unpalatable in large amounts and requires balancing with vitamin E. For most owners, choosing a high-quality conditioning feed which already contains high levels of oil and is fully balanced is a more convenient and reliable option.

4. **How can I tell if dental problems are causing my horse's weight loss?**

   Look for signs like slow or difficultly chewing (quidding), dropping feed, eating less forage than usual, or a new reluctance to eat. If you are at all concerned, arrange a visit from a qualified equine dental technician or vet to check their teeth.

5. **When should I call the vet about my horse's weight loss?**

   You should seek veterinary advice if the weight loss is sudden, severe, or unexpected. It's also particularly important to call the vet if your horse is already on a high-calorie diet and continues to lose weight, to rule out any underlying health issues which may be the cause.

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Read now

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