
Feeding for energy without calories?



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As horse owners, we all want our horses to be healthy and energetic, especially if we want to compete. Lethargy in horses can be a concerning issue for many horse owners. Horses are naturally active animals, and when they become lethargic, it can be a sign of an underlying health problem.

However, many horses that are lacking sparkle under saddle are overweight, so how can we provide feed that makes them more energetic without causing unwanted weight gain?

What are some potential causes of lethargy?

Firstly, we must address the cause of the lethargy, especially if this is out of character for your horse. There are many reasons for lethargy in horses, many of them will have a clinical cause or could be down to management and/or training practices such as the horse simply being bored of doing the same ride or ridden exercises in the arena. Before addressing the issue, a cause needs to be established or at least some potential causes ruled out. To eliminate any underlying health issues, it's important that you discuss your concerns with your vet, she/he will usually ask you lots of questions and carry out a physical examination and in some cases take some bloods to help identify a cause and offer treatment.

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Things to consider:

If an obvious clinical issue is not found it's time to consider other things such as:

- Is the horse a healthy weight? Simply put, a horse that is underweight is not receiving enough energy/calories for the work they are doing and one that is overweight is receiving too much!
- Is your horse receiving a balanced diet? Vitamins, minerals and trace elements are all needed for optimum health, and many are directly involved in energy metabolism meaning any deficiencies could result in lethargy.
- Are your horse's vaccinations, dental checks, and worm counts all up to date?
- Have you had your saddle and your horse's back checked recently?
- Discuss training and schooling ideas with your trainer, perhaps it's time to add more variety?
- Is your horse or pony being bullied in the field resulting in lack of grazing time and/or depression?

- Assess your horse's fitness, perhaps he/she needs more fittening to cope with the work you are asking him/her to do?
- Has there been a recent change in weather conditions or season? If the weather is very hot and humid, is your horse appropriately acclimatised?
- Is your horse's diet appropriate for their life stage? E.g a senior horse

The importance of a healthy body condition

One of the fundamental strategies to combat lethargy is by ensuring your horse has a healthy body condition score i.e. not overweight or underweight. If your horse is carrying excess weight, they will literally be weighed down and may not be as willing to go forward. Underweight horses may simply be trying to conserve their energy/calories for weight maintenance.

Monitor your horse or pony's body condition regularly - this will help you to keep track of gradual changes and assess whether any dietary adjustment may be necessary. For help to do this visit: <https://www.spillers-feeds.com/weight-management-tools/>

How can diet help?

- Firstly, energy and calories are the same thing! Unfortunately, you can't give your horse ridden energy without additional calories as they are the same thing! Calories are just units of energy so don't be tempted to reach for the competition mix for an overweight cob as it is very likely to make them fatter and add to the lethargy issue!
- Choosing the right feeds - Choose feeds that maintain an ideal body condition score irrespective of the amount of work the horse is in. If you're concerned about your horse's waistline, a balancer is the ideal way to provide additional vitamins, minerals and quality protein without excess calories. Low calorie chaffs such as [SPILLERS Fibre Lite Molasses Free](#) can be used to bulk out the bucket and extend eating time without compromising your horse's waistline!
- Keep your horse hydrated - Ensure your horse is drinking enough water and consider utilising mashes such as [SPILLERS Perform & Restore Mash](#) to supplement additional water intake. Dehydration can cause lethargy so consider this as a factor on particularly hot days or after travelling.
- Consider clinical conditions - these could contribute to a lack of energy such as gastric ulcers or other digestive upsets and provide a diet to help support the management of these conditions. You can read more about feeding horses prone to gastric ulcers here.
- Avoid iron supplements - Don't be tempted to reach for 'energy tonics' loaded with iron. Iron deficient anaemia is uncommon in horses, whereas anaemia secondary to chronic disease or infection is a much more common occurrence. If anaemia is apparent on blood work discuss the best course of treatment with your vet.
- B vitamin supplements - Don't be tempted to reach for 'energy tonics' loaded with iron. Iron deficient anaemia is uncommon in horses, whereas anaemia secondary to chronic disease or infection is a much more common occurrence. If anaemia is apparent on blood work discuss the best course of treatment with your vet.

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