EQUINE MEDICAL SERVICES, INC.

Equine Nutrition-What's really important.

Nathan Voris, DVM

Never before have there been more choices when it comes to feeding a horse. Feed companies have recognized horse owner demand for high quality feeds and have spent millions of dollars in researching the nutritional requirements of our equine companions. The result of this research has been the introduction of literally hundreds of new feeds. With so many choices, you may find yourself wondering if you are meeting your horse's nutritional needs. This article will discuss general requirements for the various life and activity stages and attempt to take some of the confusion out of feeding your horse.

The importance of pasture or hay in the diet of a horse cannot be overstated. The horse's digestive system is built to be primarily a forage digester. The horse will eat 2-3% of its body weight per day on a dry matter basis (hay and grain are about 90% dry matter; grass is about 30% dry matter). Over half of the horse's diet should be hay or pasture. With the exception of a few trace minerals that can be provided with a mineral block, a good quality hay or pasture will provide all of the nutritional requirements for a pleasure horse, early gestational broodmare or a stallion during the non-breeding season. A 12% protein grain may be fed to supplement individual needs.

Foals generally receive all of the nutrition required from nursing and nibbling on their mother's grain and hay. For weanlings and yearlings, a 16% protein feed will provide the added nutrients required for growth. The growth rate of the young horse should be closely monitored due to the close association of rapid growth and developmental orthopedic diseases like OCD (bone chips in joints), angular limb deformities (bowed knees, flexor tendon problems resulting in buckling at the ankles or knees, etc.), and physitis (inflamed growth plates or growing pains).

For late gestational mares (9 months until foaling), 12-14% protein grain and hay (avoid fescue) should be modestly increased (10-20%) to maintain gradual weight gain until foaling. Once the mare has foaled, the nutritional requirements due to lactation dramatically increase. As a result, the amount of hay and grain fed will need to be increased accordingly. A general rule of thumb is to increase the total amount fed by about 50%.

For athletic horses and stallions during breeding season, a 12-14% protein feed that is high in fat will meet the added nutritional and energy requirements of work. Depending upon the level of activity, the amount fed will vary from maintenance up to 50% above maintenance for athletes at the highest level (racehorses in full training).

The geriatric horse is one of the most complicated animals to feed. Nutritional requirements will vary with co-existing conditions. Generally, a feed that contains a highly digestible fiber source and is high in fat will provide nutrients that will be easily utilized by aged horses.

Finally, there are a few things that are important for horses regardless their age or activity level. The first step in digestion is chewing, therefore you should have your horse's teeth examined annually. In addition, a regular deworming program is essential to maximal digestive efficiency. Always make feeding changes gradually to avoid digestive problems. Provide a free choice salt or mineral block to cover trace mineral requirements not found in pasture or hay alone. Compare labels between types of feed to make informed choices prior to making a feeding change. Buy feed from a reputable dealer, someone you know and trust to help answer feeding questions. Talk to your veterinarian or feed dealer if you have questions, if they don't have the answer, they will be able to call someone who does.