

Basics of Equine Nutrition

Horses have different nutritional requirements depending on their stage of life and activity level. A pleasure horse requires less energy per day than a lactating mare, a growing yearling, or a performance horse.

Calories per day for 1000 lb horse:

- mare early lactation → 30,400
- breeding stallion → 20,000
- pleasure horse → 16,000
- very active performance horse → 32,000

Hay

In general, the amount of mixed grass hay a horse is fed in pounds is approximately 2% of a horse's body weight in pounds. Therefore, a 1000lb horse would require 20 lb of mixed grass hay per day. Two main types of hay are available, grass and legume hay. Hay available for horses is often a combination of both. Grass hay, such as timothy, provides more fiber and less energy and protein than legume hay. This is the hay of choice for average adult horses. Legume hay, such as clover or alfalfa, is higher in protein, energy, calcium, and vitamin A than grass hay. This hay is better for lactating mares, athletic horses, and growing horses. Alfalfa is higher in protein and minerals than grass hay, therefore horse owners should be aware that their horse might drink and urinate more frequently.

Grain

Grains can be used to supplement the horse's diet with additional energy, protein, vitamins, and minerals. The amount of grain an average horse is fed can be up to 0.8-0.9 lb of grain / 100 lbs body weight daily. However, in order to avoid gastrointestinal problems, avoid feeding more than 0.5 lb of grain/ 100 lbs body weight per feeding. Depending on the horse's nutritional requirements, this amount of grain can be fed 2 to 3 times a day. It is better to increase the number of feedings instead of increasing the amount per feeding. If a horse is fed too much, serious complication may arise, such as colic or stomach rupture, because horses cannot vomit if they overeat.

Water

Water intake is a very important component of equine nutrition. An average 1000lb horse can drink up to 10 gallons of water per day. However, depending on weather, body temperature, how active the horse is, and how much water is in their feed, this amount can vary greatly. Free choice, fresh, clean water should be available for your horse at all times to ensure hydration.

Contact your veterinarian for additional information or for tips on finding a feeding regime specifically for your horse. Any changes in feed should be made gradually over a period of 1 to 2 weeks.