

# **THE WAY OF HORSES**

By Eleanor Blazer  
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## **Nutrients – Is Your Horse Getting Enough?**

Garbage in, garbage out -- coined by computer programmers, worried about inaccurate results due to inaccurate input, applies equally to equine nutrition.

We feed our horses to provide nutrients needed to build, maintain, repair and provide energy to the body. But does the feed going into our horse provide the required nutrients? Are we getting the results we want?

The first step in calculating nutrients needed is to knowing your horse. Write down the following:

- A. How old is your horse?
- B. What is his activity level? Use the following guide (exercise ratings taken from the National Research Council's 2007 Nutrient Requirements of Horses):
  1. No work
  2. Light exercise (occasional recreational riding; heart rate 80 beats per minute; 1-3 hrs per week)
  3. Moderate exercise (recreational riding; light training; heart rate 90 beats per minute; 3-5 hrs. per week)
  4. Heavy exercise (more intense training; ranch work; heart rate 110 beats per minute; 4-5 hrs. per week)
  5. Very heavy exercise (racing; daily training; heart rate 110-150 beats per minute; intense work schedule)
  6. Non-breeding stallion
  7. Breeding stallion
  8. Pregnant mare (note what month of gestation)

9. Lactating mare

10. Open broodmare

C. What is your horse's body condition score? Is he too fat or too thin?

The second step is to determine the quality of the forage and the amount he is eating. Forage is the primary source of nutrients. It is what the equine digestive system is designed to utilize.

If poor quality forage or insufficient amounts are fed, problems such as colic, ulcers, cribbing, weaving, eating manure, chewing wood, poor body condition, reproduction issues and behavioral problems can result.

Conducting a hay analysis is the best way to determine forage quality. Send a hay sample to a testing lab to determine the nutrients present. A good lab is Equi-Analytical Laboratory. <http://www.equi-analytical.com/>

If you can't send a sample or your hay source changes frequently, buy the best quality hay available. During drought or shortage this may be a challenge. Purchase hay that contains more leaves than stems, is soft, smells good, is not dusty and has some green color.

The amount of hay horses require may vary. A good rule of thumb is one and a half to two percent of the body weight per day. Using this formula a 1,000 pound horse would need between 15 and 20 pounds a day. A horse with a high metabolism or activity level may need more. Poor quality hay would also be fed at a higher rate, though this will lead to a hay belly as the cecum will become full of hard-to-digest fiber.

Once you've determined the quality of forage and have adjusted the amount fed to match your horse's size and activity level, it's time to find a concentrate that will compliment the forage. Visit a feed store or do some research online. All major feed manufacturers have a presence on the internet.

Refer to the sheet with your horse's information. Start looking for a manufactured feed designed for your horse. If your horse is a broodmare in the last three months of gestation you do not want a feed designed for a horse at maintenance activity level. Read the feed description and the feed tag.

Most premium commercial feed formulas will give feeding directions based on activity level. Locate the one best suited for your horse.

Notice feeding directions are stated in pounds – not scoops, cups or “coffee cans”. If your horse is maintaining weight on forage, you’ll want to find a feed that doesn’t add calories. Whatever feed you decide upon, you must be able to feed the amount suggested without the horse losing weight or gaining weight.

Do not dilute the balanced mix by adding oats or another grain to “cut” the calories. This will also short your horse on needed nutrients. There are feeds on the market called “ration balancers”. These products are designed to be mixed with other grains – or fed alone if calories are not needed. Ration balancers are excellent for meeting vitamin and mineral requirements at a low feeding rate without adding extra calories.

Follow the directions and weigh your feed. Make all feed changes gradually.

In addition to providing adequate amounts of good quality forage, a feed that compliments the forage, it is necessary to provide free choice white granulated salt and fresh clean water at all times.

Follow these simple guidelines and you can be relatively sure you are providing the nutrients required by your horse.

\* For information about caring for and feeding horses take the online courses “Stable Management” and “Nutrition for Performance Horses” taught by Eleanor Blazer. Earn certification or work toward a Bachelor of Science degree in equine studies. Go to [www.horsecoursesonline.com](http://www.horsecoursesonline.com) for more information. Visit Eleanor's web site at [www.thewayofhorses.com](http://www.thewayofhorses.com)