

You are what you eat

Sophie Edwards, nutritionist at Allen & Page Horse Feeds, explains the essentials of the best diet for your native horse or pony.

Native ponies and horses that have evolved to survive in tough conditions are typically 'good-doers' who thrive on fresh air, and present their owners with difficulties in feeding. Natives who put on weight from grazing good grass should have their grazing time limited, and those receiving hay should have the amounts restricted. In such circumstances however, owners do run the very real risk of their horse developing a vitamin and mineral deficiency.

In simple terms, the more your horse eats, the fatter he will get, and if he eats less, he will lose weight. It is not just the amount of feed you give him, but the choice of feed you use, which can affect his weight. Providing your horse with all the nutrients he requires, without excessive calories is a difficult balancing act.

A horse will generally need to eat two kilograms of hard feed a day to meet these vitamin and mineral requirements, but very few native breeds will need this quantity. When managing the diet of such a horse on limited intakes of concentrate feed, it is essential that consideration be given to vitamin and mineral intake.

Choosing a low calorie feed containing all of the necessary nutrients and essential fatty acids for your horse is far better than simply trying to reduce a

horse's weight by just cutting his feed, reducing grazing time, or the amount of hay he gets. Such a regime alone may help him lose a few pounds, but there will usually be a downside, such as poor coat condition, reduced stamina, and a bad attitude. Remember to make any changes slowly to allow the gut microflora time to adjust to the new feed.

Horses that are overweight because they are receiving too much hard feed should have their intake reduced, or be switched to a lower energy product. Horses gaining weight from grazing good grass should have their grazing time limited, and those receiving hay should have their amounts restricted. A fitter, slimmer horse will find working easier and so a gradual fitness programme should be implemented alongside an appropriate diet.

When managing the diet of an overweight horse on limited intakes of concentrate feed, it is essential that consideration is given to providing a properly balanced vitamin and mineral intake. Reduce the energy content of the diet by using fibrous forages and a low calorie feed that will still provide vitamins and minerals. Alternatively just feed chaff and a vitamin and mineral supplement. This will satisfy his nutrient requirements, but at a reduced calorie intake which should



lead to steady weight loss.

The energy content of the diet should only be increased after the workload has increased (when you think 'energy' you need to bear in mind that this also means 'calories'). This should ensure that the horse is utilising his existing energy reserves rather than adding to his stores and gaining weight.

How do you know if your horse is too fat?

Firstly learn about body condition. The simplest guide to seeing whether your horse is overweight is to run your hand across his ribcage (roughly in the middle of his side). If you have to press hard to feel the ribs, or if you can't feel the ribs at all, your horse is 'overweight', or 'carrying too much condition'. Not being able to see the ribs, but being able to feel them easily,

is generally a reliable guide to the best condition to maintain.

Difficulties of feeding the lazy good-doer

Feeding the lazy good doer can be difficult. Some lazy horses that have been on a very restricted diet will perk up if they start to receive a diet that is balanced with vitamins and minerals; others will show more enthusiasm as they start to get fitter and lose excess weight. Try turning out horses in menages or schools rather than keeping them in stables. The opportunity to move around more will use calories and will help to prevent the horse from becoming bored. The ideal is long steady periods of exercise, but this can be time consuming. If you can use a horse walker this will help. Lunging can also be of value.



hyperlipaemia. This is a term used to describe the rapid breakdown of the horse's fat stores, which may cause liver damage if the fatty acids are deposited in the liver. However, you may well find it necessary to reduce the amount of feed your horse is receiving and it is a good idea to change to a feed that is higher in fibre and lower in starch, without lots of cereals.

Although it is a year-round problem, the number of incidences of laminitis increases dramatically in spring and again in late summer when there is a rapid grass growth. At these times grass is particularly high in fructan (a type of soluble carbohydrate), which is also thought to initiate the onset of laminitis. So restricting access to grazing, or using a grazing muzzle may not only keep your horse's weight down, but help keep him healthy as well.

As the saying goes, prevention is certainly better than cure, and there are several measures that you can take to reduce the risk of diet-related laminitis.

As part of your overall management strategy, you will

and in trim condition you need to either increase the intensity of work he is doing or length of time he is exercised for each day; or reduce his daily energy intake. If you start by doing at least one of these then you can always resort to doing both at a later date if you need to! Remember that changes take time – forcing a horse to lose weight too fast can make him irritable and grumpy, as well as

possibly leading to metabolic problems. Unless you are able to regularly weigh your horse, it will usually take about a month before you can start to see a difference, although you can make regular checks with a tape measure around his girth. Don't expect miracles, but as long as some weight loss has occurred then stick with it and you will continue to gradually improve matters.

Originally a hay and corn shop, Allen & Page is a family-owned, independent horse feed manufacturer based in the heart of Norfolk. There is an extensive feed range, with something formulated for every type of horse and pony, in all types of work, regardless of age, size or susceptibility to ailments and allergies. All of the feeds are made using only natural ingredients of the highest quality, leaving out recovered oils, and animal-based byproducts like gelatine and fishmeal.

The Allen & Page mill is drug-free, and the company prides itself on using only real herbs free from artificial flavourings. All of its products are approved by the Vegetarian Society, and no GM ingredients are ever used. It all adds up to the healthiest, most natural diet a horse can have.



Threat of Laminitis

Overweight horses and ponies tend to be more susceptible to laminitis, so keeping your horse's weight under control can help to reduce the chances of laminitis occurring.

It is important not to starve over-weight horses or ponies as this may result in

want to provide a laminitic horse or pony with a diet that is supportive, rather than one that could make matters worse. It is a bad idea to feed cereal mixes or straights to a horse prone to, or with laminitis.

So, what it boils down to is two options: to keep your native horse or pony healthy

Grassroots Systems

Animal Record
On farm computer system for all your pedigree, progeny, movement, veterinary and production records. Any number of breeds, all domestic species

Breed Society Record
Specialist software for small breed Societies. Comprehensive, flexible and easy to use. Professional backup, support and training. Data conversion from existing systems.
Currently used by over 60 breeds

Ped eView and Ped eWeb
Electronic and on line flock/herd/stud book. Access pedigrees, progeny lists and ownership records for participating breeds. Please apply for details.

Free Demo CD's available

Grassroots Systems Ltd
Libby Henson,
PO Box 251, Exeter, EX2 8WX
Tel: 01392 437788
Email: Libby@Grassroots.co.uk