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Horse *e-newsletter*

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Horse Feed – Who Needs It?

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Horses evolved over millions of years as grazers, roaming around selecting the best forages they could find. While they did eat seeds growing on those plants, they did not take in large quantities of seeds or grain at a single meal. So, why do we feed horses grain at all? Well, when you look at the horses that Mother Nature supports with a forage-only, continuous grazing program, you find that they are usually smaller framed, lighter muscled, mature at a later age and don't have the lifespan we currently see in domesticated horses. Mother Nature's program just isn't designed to support the physical demands we place on domestic horses.

Throughout history, horses that worked for a living; such as horses that pulled chariots, carriages, delivery carts or those used in the cavalry; have all been fed grain. Because grain is a more concentrated energy source, containing more calories per pound than forages, working horses could take in enough calories to support their physical demands by eating grain. Working horses either didn't have sufficient time in the day for grazing or there wasn't enough quality forage available to support their level of activity.

As knowledge of horse nutrition has advanced, we've come to realize that energy isn't the only limiting nutrient in an all-forage diet. Depending on the forage and the lifestyle of the horse, protein, vitamins and minerals may also be lacking. So horse feeds have evolved from a single grain like oats or corn to multiple grain mixes, and now, even better, grains mixed with other ingredients to provide a complete complement of nutrients. Today we have grain mixes that provide balanced nutrition for horses of different lifestyles such as growing, breeding, and performance horses. These grain mixes are designed to be fed with a minimum of 1% of the horse's body weight in hay or equivalent pasture. That is a minimum of 10 lbs of hay for a 1000 lb horse, which provides the amount of fiber necessary for maintaining normal activity and digestive functions in the horse's intestines. Many horses are fed more hay or pasture than that and the amount and quality of the hay or pasture will impact how much feed is needed to support adequate body condition and level of activity.

Most formulated feeds are designed to be fed at a minimum of 3.5 – 4 lbs per day in order to meet all protein, vitamin and mineral requirements when fed with hay or pasture. However, there are situations where horse owners have very well managed, improved pastures or top quality harvested forage (such as high quality alfalfa hay). These forages contain more calories and are available to the horse in greater quantities than what Mother Nature usually provides. When horses have access to free-choice top quality pasture or hay, they will easily eat 3% of their body weight or more, which will provide more calories than needed for a maintenance or low activity lifestyle. In these situations horses can become overweight or even obese, so how do you provide proper nutrition to them without an overabundance of calories?

You can restrict time spent grazing to a few hours per day or reduce the amount of hay offered to 1.5 – 2% of their body weight and this will certainly help control calorie intake, but sometimes these horses will still gain weight if fed the minimum 3.5 – 4 lbs of feed. In these cases, feeding only 1 – 2 lbs of a formulated feed that was designed to be fed at higher feeding rates can result in nutritional deficiencies in the diet. You don't want to increase the amount of feed and end up with an obese horse, so what do you do? This is where "forage balancers" or "ration balancers", such as Purina Nature's Essentials Enrich 12™ and Enrich 32™ fit very nicely.

These products are formulated to be low in calories and to meet protein, vitamin and mineral requirements in 1 – 2 lbs per day for 1000 – 1200 lb horses. With these two products, three eight ounce cups equals one pound. They are a great option for horses that maintain good condition on hay or pasture alone and just don't need the calories that would come with 3.5 lbs or more of a formulated feed. The Nature's Essentials product you choose depends on the type and quality of forage available. Enrich 12™ works well for mature horses eating green pasture or high quality hay such as alfalfa, while Enrich 32™ has a higher protein content to better fortify a typical grass hay diet or for horses that are still growing and need a higher protein balance to better support growth and development.

Horses that are working hard, are lactating or are eating average quality hay will still benefit from a well formulated feed product fed at the recommended feeding rates. But for those less active horses, easy-keepers, or those with access to exceptional quality forage, you may want to look at Purina Nature's Essentials Enrich 12™ or Enrich 32™ to meet nutrient requirements without adding unnecessary calories.