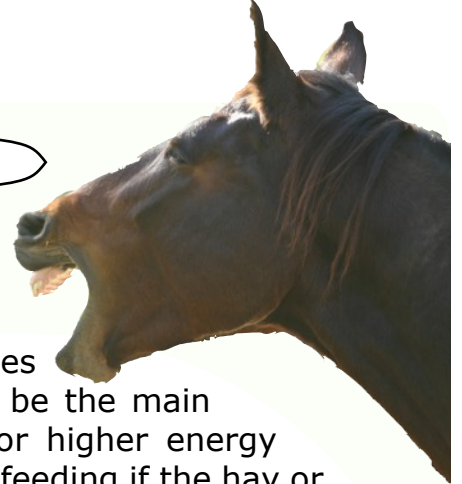


What is essential feed for horses?



Fibre - and lots of it - is essential feed for a horse! Horses have evolved to eat a *very* high fibre diet so this should be the main component of any feeding regime. Any extra nutrients or higher energy feeds the horse may need can be added by supplementary feeding if the hay or grass is deficient or the horse is working hard/growing/feeding a foal etc. but other than that most horses are fine on grass or hay or a combination of the two with perhaps some mineral supplementation.



These horses are grazing a native grass pasture that is high in biodiversity (species). Ideal feed for horses.

Horses require feed that takes a long time to collect and chew - they are the ultimate slow feeders. They evolved to eat low energy (low calorie) fibrous food for many hours of the day and night (around 15 hours out of 24). They have not evolved to eat high energy 'meals' as we do. If you do not take this fact into consideration when feeding your horse you risk behavioural problems (such as 'cribbing') and gastrointestinal problems (such as colic/gastric ulcers/laminitis - laminitis starts in the gut and results in a serious problem of the feet).

Horses are herbivores. This means that they eat only plants. Plant matter is far bulkier than the feed of a carnivore (meat eater). Meat is also much more energy dense. This is why a dog spends a very small amount of time eating and large periods of each day sleeping compared to a horse that spends large periods of each day eating (or should do) and much less time sleeping (a horse spends an average of only four hours a day sleeping).

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Please remember

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Unless the horse is working hard (i.e. endurance, eventing, racing etc.) they can easily get too fat. This may lead to an owner reducing the *quantity* of feed when in fact it would be better to reduce the quality (in terms of calories) fed to the horse but keep up the volume. Reducing the *quantity* of feed fed to a horse can be dangerous as horses are meant to graze and browse for *at least* twelve hours a day. The saliva that a horse produces from chewing buffers acid in the gut which is dripped in to the stomach constantly and their gut is designed to work continually.

Whenever possible allow your horse to graze and aim for this to be the bulk of your horse's diet. Well managed pasture with a diversity of species is the best feed for horses and will save you money because you then do not have to buy as much (or any) supplementary feed. If your grass is high calorie (grass varies enormously in calorie content) and your horse tends to get fat you will need to be careful that he/she does not get overweight.

If there is not enough pasture aim to feed lots of hay. If you have a horse that is prone to getting fat try to source low calorie hay.

If you buy your hay from a produce store ask them to source some for you. Even if they do not have any in they may find you some if there is enough demand for it. If you are feeding hay that you think is too high in calories you can soak it in water (in a haynet for about an hour) before feeding as this will leach out some of the sugar. Do not give the water used to soak the hay to your horse as this will now be high in sugar!

If you do decide to start feeding your horse concentrates (because he/she is working very hard and is not maintaining condition on hay/grass alone) then get some expert advice about what to feed. Aim to keep it as simple as possible – it is not a good idea to start feeding a variety of feed types as you can end up feeding the horse a very unbalanced diet indeed.



Get expert advice before feeding concentrates. There is a bewildering amount of feeds available and it is easy to get it wrong and waste money or worse - feed your horse incorrectly.



These horses have access to ad-lib fibre in the form of a round bale of hay and pasture.

An independent equine nutritionist is a good place to start and reputable feed companies usually offer a free advice service (but keep in mind that they will only recommend their own products).

See our publication [A horse is a horse - of course \(2011\)](#) for more information about natural horse feeding behaviour.

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