

Roughages

Whether grass or legume, the right hay for your horse is an important part of his nutrition. Here are some tips from the American Association of Equine Practitioners on choosing the best hay for your horse.

High-quality hay can be an important source of essential nutrients in your horse's diet. A horse's protein and energy requirements depend on age, stage of development, metabolism and workload. A mature horse will eat 2 to 2.5% of its body weight a day, and for optimum health, nutritionists recommend that at least half of this should be roughage such as hay. For a 1000-pound horse, that means at least 10 pounds of roughage each day.

Hay generally falls into one of two categories - grasses or legumes. Legume hay is higher in protein, energy, calcium and vitamin A than grass hays. While hay alone may not meet the total dietary requirements of young, growing horses or those used for high levels of performance, high-quality hay may supply ample nutrition for less active adult horses.

Remember that horses at different ages and stages of growth, development and activity have different dietary requirements.

Grains:

- Sweet feeds are highly palatable to your horse. And, they allow you to see individual grains to inspect quality.
- Pellets and extruded feeds are usually highly digestible, because the grains have been ground up into small particles--and a horse with fussy eating habits can't sort ingredients (that is, leave what he doesn't care for in the bottom of the feed tub).
- Pellets are a good choice if your horse has dental problems (especially the very young and very old), because you can soak them to create a soft, easy-to-chew mush.
- Extruded feeds are cooked, which makes certain nutrients highly digestible. And, their large "kibble" format encourages thorough chewing, which slows down a horse that bolts his feed. But the extruded format also takes up more space, so you get less food value per bag than with sweet feeds or pellets.

Protein Needed:

The simplest way to get the right protein level is to use a feed formulated for your horse's stage of life. That way, he gets all the other nutrients he needs, too.

Most adult horses aren't likely to be protein-deficient. Oats and many other grains typically contain 10 to 13 percent protein. Growing pasture grass typically has 12 percent or more.

Mature grass hay may have as little as 5 to 6 percent protein, so if your horse eats primarily mature hay, and little or no grain, he may not be getting enough protein.

Boost the percentage by adding some alfalfa to your horse's ration or using a high-protein feed. Some specially formulated feeds, designed to be fed in very low amounts (such as 1 or 2 pounds a day), contain 25 to 30 percent protein.

STAGE OF LIFE	PERCENT PROTEIN NEEDED
Weanling	16%
Yearling	14%
Pregnant mare	14%
Performance horse	10-12%
Pastured horse	10-12%
Breeding stallion	10-12%
Senior citizen	14%