

Equine Nutritionists – Who Needs Them?

Amy E. Halls, M.Sc. – Monogastric Nutritionist
Shur-Gain, Nutreco Canada Inc.

Who needs them? You do! Whether your horse is a high performance horse, broodmare, growing horse or a pasture ornament, it needs a complete balanced diet for maximum health and performance.

A 2010 USA study conducted by an independent equine nutrition consulting firm found that most horses did not receive the recommended daily 2-2.5% dry matter intake (based on body weight). Many horses received only small amounts of hay (as low as 30% of the total ration), and 9.4% of horses in the study were fed a grain-based diet rather than primarily hay. Of the 181 horses in the study, 85% were fed some sort of nutritional supplement (i.e. joint, hoof, digestive, vitamin or mineral), but only 15% of the owners received nutritional advice from an equine nutritionist regarding their choices. Many of the horses had significant nutrient deficiencies, such as calcium, magnesium, potassium, iodine and copper. Even sodium and chloride levels were low because the horses did not have access to a free-choice salt block. The horses owned by those that did receive nutritional feeding advice appeared to be receiving adequate nutrients from their rations. This study reinforces the importance of working with an Equine Nutritionist to help determine your horse's individual nutritional needs based on its health and performance. This is determined by reviewing the nutritional content and components of the horse's current diet and creating a nutritionally balanced diet designed to meet its needs.

However, not all horses require an Equine Nutritionist. If your horse is healthy, active and has a good body condition score, then its current diet is meeting all of its needs. In general, horses between the ages of three and sixteen years that do not have serious health problems or high work demands can do well on a diet of good quality forage, salt, fresh water and a balanced horse vitamin/mineral supplement, such as EQUILINE Accelerator Plus Balancer or EQUILINE Pelleted Horse Mineral Premix.

You should consider consulting an Equine Nutritionist for the following situations:

- 1. Changing health demands.** Pregnant and lactating mares, foals, growing horses, and senior horses all have different nutritional demands. The mare will need extra nutritional support to maintain her health, develop a healthy foal and produce nutritious milk for her foal. The growing horse benefits from increased amounts of energy, protein, calcium, phosphorus and other minerals. The older horse may have trouble digesting all the nutrients they require and would benefit if fed a highly processed feed or increased levels of protein, vitamins and minerals.
- 2. Performance demands.** Performance horses have increased nutritional needs and require a specific diet to meet those needs. Horses switching to a different sport or

starting training will have altered nutrient demands, which will need to be addressed through dietary changes. Just feeding a higher quality of a feed may not necessarily meet their requirements.

3. **Health problems.** Special diets can help treat or manage certain disorders, such as recurring colic, founder, laminitis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (heaves), dental issues, hyperkalemic periodic paralysis (HYPP) and exertional rhabdomyolysis (tying-up). Any past or present illnesses such as diarrhea, laminitis, arthritis, allergies, ulcers, colic, and recovery from surgery may require a special diet. Under and overweight horses also require special diets to help them maintain a healthy weight.
4. **You are confused with all the supplements and horse feeds available on the market.** All supplements on the market sound great, but which one is the best for your horse? If you use more than one, there is concern of the overlapping of nutrients that could cause more harm than good. An equine nutritionist can help you determine the best supplement(s) and complete feed for your horse and develop a feeding plan using the correct amounts.
5. **Questions or concerns about the quality of your pasture, forage or feed.** Do you know what your pasture or forage is providing or lacking in? Are you sure your feed mix is meeting your horse's needs? An equine nutritionist can analyze the nutrient content of your pasture, forage and determine if any nutrient is lacking in the horse's diet. Pasture and forage samples can be sent through your Shur-Gain feed dealer to the Shur-Gain Laboratory for nutrient analysis. The nutritionist will explain the lab results and will recommend changes to the diet if they are needed.

Overall, remember that in order to keep your horse healthy, he needs to be properly cared for. That includes regular veterinary and farrier visits, adequate shelter, and a balanced diet consisting of quality forage and supplements.