



OUR EXPERT
Clare MacLeod

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An apple a day

FEED SPECIAL

Keep your horse feeling fit and well with independent nutritionist **Clare MacLeod's** tips to providing a healthy diet



A healthy diet tends to make us think about our recommended 'five a day' of fruit and vegetables, cutting down on treats and generally not overeating. But what does the term mean for our horses and ponies? If you turn your horse out to pasture during the day and stable

him at night, or vice versa, and feed hay or haylage plus a scoop or two of compound feed, is this a healthy diet? Maybe not...

Eating essentials

First and foremost, a healthy diet has to be balanced, meaning it supplies all the essential nutrients a horse requires every day (see left).

Humans try to eat a wide variety of foods – and are encouraged to do so by nutritionists – to ensure their diets are balanced. Horses, however, tend to eat most of their diet as one type of food – grass. But, in most cases, grass does not supply a balanced diet.

Feed manufacturers originally developed compound feeds to balance the diet, adding nutrients that the horse could not get from grass.

Nowadays, the situation is more complicated. Many owners feed a compound because they believe it is the right thing to do, but don't feed enough to balance the micronutrients – vitamins and minerals – in their horse's diet.

Ideally, we should feed as much forage as is necessary to supply energy

(for weight maintenance), and add other feeds or supplements only to balance that forage.

So, for example, a horse who is maintaining weight on good forage only needs to be fed a multi-spectrum vitamin and mineral supplement.

The forage alone may not provide a healthy diet – see the section 'Sugar levels', below, for more on this.

Fibre importance

Horses, unlike humans, have a dietary requirement for fibre, which is vital to their health and performance. They can extract useful nutrients from fibre, so it means much more than just bulk to your horse.

The healthiest feeds supply energy from fibrous sources first, with energy from simpler carbohydrates – starch, for example – only for horses who work hard.

Sugar levels

Sugar gets a bad press for horses, probably because high dietary levels are harmful to humans. But the natural equine diet – grass and other herbage – can contain high levels of

BALANCING ACT

A balanced diet supplies all the essential nutrients a horse needs every day without any shortage or excess, to keep the animal in optimal condition.

These nutrients include:

- PROTEIN
- CARBOHYDRATES (including fibre), all of which provide energy
- FATS AND OILS, which also provide energy
- VITAMINS AND MINERALS
- WATER

sugar and sugar-like fructans (together known as water-soluble carbohydrates, or WSC) at certain times of the year.

Horses are equipped to handle high levels of sugar during short periods when feed is abundant, laying down fat in order to survive the sparse winter. This may be why horses are so good at seeking out the most sugary feeds, seeming to have a sweet tooth.

High levels of sugar probably aren't a problem for many horses if this occurs for a short period of time, such as during the spring if the horse is slim and exercised regularly.

Continuously high levels of sugar are a problem, however, especially for horses in light work or none at all, those who are overweight and especially those who remain too fat all year round.

Grass and forages are by far the largest contributors of water-soluble carbohydrates in horses' diets, even when compared with molassed compound feeds. Molasses is only 60 per cent sugar and is used in relatively small amounts in most compounds.

Hard-working horses can take high levels of water-soluble carbohydrates in spring and summer pasture. For other horses, however, ad lib spring and summer grass is unhealthy because it oversupplies water-soluble carbohydrates and energy.

Adding antioxidants

Dietary antioxidants are important for a horse's optimal health. Although a variety of vitamins and minerals act as antioxidants, compounds

DIETARY NO-NOS

✗ **FEEDING** substantial amounts of sugar and starch for a non-working horse of a healthy weight, or any equine who is overweight.

✗ **GIVING HIM LESS** than the recommended amount of compound feed without extra vitamins and minerals.

✗ **TOO MANY** sweet treats of any sort.

✗ **FASTING** for long periods of time.



✗ **RESTRICTING** forage for most horses (apart from those who are overweight).

✗ **PROVIDING SUPPLEMENTS** without first assessing and balancing the diet.

✗ **FEEDING A DRY**, preserved diet with no succulence or green feedstuff.

✗ **ALLOWING ACCESS** to ad lib spring/summer grass for most horses.

'Access to fresh water once a day is preferable to stale, dirty water freely available in a trough'

called phytochemicals – which are found in plants – provide a valuable extra supply.

Colourful plant matter – including fruit, vegetables, spices and grass – supplies antioxidants, so a horse on a diet of hay and grain, or grain-based compound feed could miss out.

So, if you feed a large part of your horse's forage as hay or haylage, also giving him fresh or green plant material (such as carrots, apples,

rosehips, cut green herbage and dried alfalfa or nettles) or supplements that supply antioxidants will help keep him healthy.

Water and hydration

Unlike humans, horses don't have unhealthy fizzy or caffeine-loaded drinks available to them, so their fluid intake is much healthier than ours.

In the UK, we tend to offer water to our horses ad lib. This means they are usually well hydrated, so long as the water is fresh and palatable. Remember to clean out field water troughs regularly and replace stable water daily to stop it becoming stale.

Horses are adapted to having water access only once daily, and fresh water once a day is preferable to stale, stagnant, dirty water freely available in a trough.

However, free-choice fresh water is probably best for working horses, as they will tend to drink more when water is always available than when they are offered it once or twice a day.

A healthy diet is primarily a balanced one, something that is commonly forgotten in horse circles. This is probably due to the number of well-packaged feeds and supplements we have available.

Getting the levels of forage and supplements right is important if your horse is to have a correctly balanced, healthy diet.

Just like for us, restricting sugar, feeding plenty of fibre and fresh foods (if appropriate) and maintaining hydration are key for a healthy diet. **11**



TIPS TO ENSURE HEALTHY EATING

- ✓ Balance your horse's diet.
- ✓ Base his diet on fibrous feeds.
- ✓ Limit sugar and starch intake, especially for horses in light work or at rest.
- ✓ Add fresh foods and herbs to boost antioxidant intake for horses on restricted grass.
- ✓ Ensure fresh water is always freely available.