

Water most overlooked item in horse ration

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Horses need energy, protein, vitamins, minerals and roughage, but probably most overlooked element in horse rations is water, said Gary Stauffer, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension educator in Holt County.

“A good rule of thumb is that your horse will drink about a gallon of water a day for every hundred pounds of body weight,” Stauffer said. “On a hot summer day, that number might double, but they tend to drink a little bit less in the winter.”

He said that the most important thing an owner needs to know about his or her horse is how much it weighs. An idle horse will eat one-and-a-half to two percent of its body weight in dry matter per day. Growing horses and lactating brood mares might approach two-and-a-half to three percent. Hard-working horses might require one-and-three-quarter percent to two-and-a-half percent, up to two or three percent for intense work.

For horse owners who don't have a scale available, some feed companies have weight tapes that go around the horse's heart girth, Stauffer said. That's about where the cinch goes around the saddle, so it would be behind the elbows and over the withers, “just the total circumference around the horse's barrel.” Stauffer said any tape measure would work.

To figure the horse's weight, multiply the heart girth in inches times itself. Multiply that number by the body length in inches, from the point of the shoulder horizontally to the rear of the quarter, and divide by 330. The result will be the horse's approximate weight in pounds.

“So it's heartgirth times heartgirth times body length divided by 330,” Stauffer said.

Once the owner knows the horse is getting enough food, the next question is whether it's the right kind. Horses need protein, energy, vitamins and minerals in their rations, Stauffer said. Energy is fuel for the horse. Protein builds bones and muscles and tissues. Minerals, too, are especially important for bone growth.

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To determine if the horse is getting an appropriate ration, monitor its body condition. Horses are scored from one to nine. Ones are very thin. Nines are very obese. Horses should be in the middle at about a five. You ought to be able to feel a horse's ribs with your fingers, but not be able to see its ribs with your eyes.

Protein is the most expensive thing in horse rations, so keep that level just at the point where it meets all the requirements, but doesn't exceed them a lot. Protein, if fed to excess, it is converted into energy and that's a very expensive form of energy. If the horse is used for very strenuous events, the process of breaking down protein creates body heat, which is a disadvantage to an athlete.

The most important minerals to consider are calcium and phosphorus, Stauffer said. If they're deficient, the horse will have poor feet, legs and bone structure. Calcium should be higher in the ratio than phosphorus.

Horses also need salt. Stauffer advised free-choice salt or maybe a trace-mineralized salt.

A lot of times, horses can live on roughage alone. Stauffer said that people tend to feed more grain than horses need. A good rule of thumb is at least 50 percent of the horse's ration ought to be roughage. A hard-working horse might need some grain in its ration, but horses should receive at least one percent of their body weight in roughage every day.