

Horse Feeding Insights: Is Your Overweight Horse Eating Enough?

By Eric Haydt

It is hard to imagine when looking at your chubby companions that they might not be getting enough to eat. Horses who tend to be easy keepers, and either maintain their weight or get overweight on very little grain, are often a harder feeding challenge those horses who seem to not be able to eat enough. If you are measuring your feed in cups or handfuls, you may have a horse in this category. We call what you feed a "guilt cup" and is often fed because they give you that pathetic look when everyone else gets to eat.

Breeds such as Morgans and Warmbloods are often easy keepers. Ponies and miniature horses are also candidates for the easy keeper category. However, any breed can be susceptible to a slow metabolism. Just like people, horses are individuals and can't be lumped into a specific group.

Nutritionally, the amount of grain that you give the easy keepers is doing virtually nothing unless it allows you to catch them. Just about every feed on the market today requires the typical 1000 lb. horse to be fed anywhere from 5 lbs. to as much as 10 lbs. per day. Just look on the back of the bag or read the feed tag for feeding directions and do the math. The feeding rates are designed to provide your horse the proper amount of protein, fat, fiber, vitamins, and minerals for the type of horse being fed and the type of feed. For instance, young horses, broodmares and breeding stallions typically require higher levels of protein in the diet. Horses being fed small amount of hay or pasture may need more fiber in the grain diet. And thin horses may need higher levels of fat.

We tend to see easy keepers as horses that have sufficient pasture or hay, usually no elevated requirements for extra protein, and they certainly don't need anymore fat. The problem is balancing the vitamins and minerals that they are lacking in their diet by not feeding the recommended amount of feed. Over a matter of time, the horse will either become slightly deficient or will pull the nutrients it needs from bone and other tissue that needs to eventually be replaced. There are a multitude of vitamin and mineral supplements on the market, but often they are designed only for specific needs and lacking in a few of the necessary nutrients. When you try to balance a couple of different supplements to make up for a short fall in one, you often end up duplicating other nutrients and wasting money. As with any animal, obesity puts a strain on the whole system supporting all that weight. Unfortunately, the easy keeper also has the problem of being underfed nutrients that contribute to proper hair and hoof growth, immune response, stamina, and normal cellular function.

In addition, if you are feeding any diets that supplement yeast cultures, probiotics, or any other nutraceutical type products, they too will be fed in quantities too small to perform the functions they were provided for in the first place.

The best and easiest way is to feed a diet designed for easy keepers that is designed to provide all the vitamins and minerals, but not the added calories that seem to continue to add up around the girth area. That way, fat and unhappy horse gets to eat something along with all his pals in the barn. In addition, they get to eat a diet where the nutrients are balanced by a nutritionist who takes into consideration limitations of the easy keeper diet. The analogy is similar to baking. Certainly I would listen to the advise of a baker rather than continuing to dump until the mix looks correct. The batter may look right, but will the cake, or the horse, rise to the occasion when you need it most.

So remember, if you are feeding less than the recommended amount listed on the feedbag, you are not going to be meeting the vitamin and mineral needs of the horse. Consider a diet that requires less quantity and provides a higher level of nutrient fortification per pound of feed. I'm not guaranteeing that your horse will run faster, jump higher, or even look a lot different, but internally you will be maintaining a healthier horse.

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