

Every spring we talk with people who are concerned about their horse's appearance. After the long hair sheds out or the winter blanket comes off, people are surprised to find that their horse is too skinny or too fat. Of course, there are horses that are "just right." If your horse is in good shape and weight, kudos to you for properly anticipating and adjusting for his seasonal needs!

If you compete in any equine sports, you are well aware that the season will be here in a few months. You want your horse to be in condition and looking like a million bucks. Getting him there is a slow process. In fact, it's a year-round process. It's unrealistic to expect that the horse that is too skinny or too fat in March is going to be in top shape in April. If you assess his condition now, review your feeding routine, and pay attention to what he is actually eating, you'll have a good start for the upcoming season. There is more than diet that plays into his overall condition. Genetics, general health, and conditioning all have their role. This is a feed article though, so we'll leave the other topics for the experts in those fields.

First, what kind of condition is your horse in right now? Can you feel ribs? Does he have a cresty neck and a fat tailhead? Do his hips jut out, with hollows behind his barrel? Are his withers rounded or sharp? Is his neck filled out or gaunt? Is there a groove running along his spine or does his spine appear to be a ridge that runs the length of his back? Does he have well-defined muscling? These are various signs of horses that may be too fat or too skinny, or of horses that are aged. Each horse's anatomy is unique to him and is affected by his age and genetics; two things that we can't control. It may be more helpful to look for changes in your horse's body. If your normally chunky pony now seems ribby, you have some work to do. Ditto if your girth seems to have become shorter over the winter.

Have you heard of body condition scoring? It's a way to objectively determine the amount of fat that your horse is- or isn't- carrying. It can be a good indication of his general health. I want to caution you that it isn't the be-all and end-all of good health though; your horse can have a good body condition score yet still have health issues. If you would like to learn more about body condition scoring, ask your feed store for information. They may also be able to set up a visit for you with a feed representative, who will come out to your barn, assess your horses, and teach you how to do it yourself. Many times, these visits are free. Ask your veterinarian also, especially if you have additional concerns about your horse's health.

Let's look at your feeding routine. A huge part of your horse's health depends on your management. Your management may very well have to change with the seasons. Horses that have been fat and happy on pasture all summer are now on hay diets, but are they getting as many calories? While it can be hard to get a calorie count on grass, it's easy to have your hay analyzed and determine how many calories your horse is getting from his hay. Make sure that you weigh your hay though so you get an idea of how many pounds you are feeding. You won't have to do it every day, just long enough to develop your sense of how much your horse is

eating in pounds. Remember, too, that not all flakes weigh the same. They can vary because of the settings on the baler.

Maybe your horse is turned out with a round bale, and you have no idea of how many pounds per day that he is eating. If you can't weigh it, you'll need to be vigilant about checking your horse's body condition frequently. Monitor the condition of the round bale too. It can happen that the bale gets wet, starts to mold, and the horses don't want to eat it. You may think that your horse is eating as much as he wants every day when, in fact, he doesn't want to eat that hay but has no choice. Be prepared to put a tarp over your bale if rain or snow is predicted and weigh down the tarp so that the wind doesn't carry it away. With the price of hay continually increasing during the winter, no one wants to have to throw out hay!

Many of us have situations where two or more horses are turned out together. Again, it can be hard to determine how much hay one horse is eating. If one seems to be getting chunkier while another is losing weight, you'll have to change something. It can help to set out multiple piles of hay, out of kicking distance. Still, it's common that one horse will keep the other(s) on the move and that not everyone will get equal opportunities to eat. One horse may drive others away from round bales too. You may need to rig up "eating stations" using corral panels or fence lines. Just be careful that you don't create situations where one horse can get trapped in a corner or against a fence by another, more aggressive horse. Timid horses can be especially prone to weight loss during winter season if they are only willing to approach hay when other horses move away. Closely watch those horses that are followers. They may still be hungry but leave the hay because the boss horse has decided to move to the other end of the pasture.

So far, I've only addressed hay concerns. Let's look at your routine with concentrated feed too. I know there are people who give concentrated feed in a group setting, but I really don't recommend it. First, it doesn't address each horse's individual nutritional needs. Add to that the fact that food-aggressive horses can be very nasty to other horses when something tasty is being offered. Timid horses who don't have an opportunity to eat will miss out on calories and nutrients. It's best to offer each horse his own bucket, containing feed that is tailored to his specific needs, in a quiet place where he can eat in peace. And if you have a worrier who can't finish his feed because of the level of activity in the barn or because everyone else is being turned out, you may have to alter your feeding routine to allow him more time to eat in peace.

The last topic that we'll touch on today is what you are feeding your horse. Take a few moments and write down what you give him daily. How many pounds of feed? How many pounds of forage? No, not the volume, we want to know the weight. Now look at your feed bag. You'll see a chart that recommends how much you should feed your horse based on his weight and his activity level. Be honest about the activity level. If you don't ride when the temperature dips below 30 degrees, then it's unlikely that your horse is doing heavy work during the winter. Be accurate with his weight too. Ask your feed store if they have the weight tapes that calculate your horse's weight based on his heart girth and his body length. (Nope, this is NOT the same as his blanket size.) If you are feeding the amount that is recommended, or close to it, and your

horse is too skinny or too fat, then it's likely that it isn't the right feed for him. If you are feeding LESS than the bag recommends and your horse is too fat, consider changing to a lower calorie feed or a ration balancer. If he is too skinny, then increase the feed or look for a feed with more calories. If you are feeding MORE than the bag recommends and your horse is fat, cut back a bit to help him lose weight. If he is skinny, then consider switching to a higher calorie feed and increase his hay too. Have a talk with someone at the feed store who is knowledgeable about feeding horses. They can help you determine if your horses are getting enough nutrients and help you figure out the best feed for him.

Horse feeds come in many different forms, and I don't mean just pellets, textured, or extruded. There is high fat, low fat, high fiber, low carb, complete, no soy...the list is endless. But that's good news for you, because it means that there are many choices for you and your horse.

When it comes to feed, you get what you pay for. Good feed costs more than "keeps 'em alive" feed, and great feed is more expensive still. If you want your horse to look like a million bucks in the spring, you won't get there by feeding the cheapest feed. Nor will you get there by feeding grains only, such as oats. You will need to invest money in his diet. On the other hand, feeding higher quality feeds properly may mean that you don't have to give additional supplements unless you are addressing specific needs, such as joint issues. The higher quality feeds deliver more for the buck in terms of usable nutrients for your horse too.

Feeds can be roughly grouped into three different levels. The first is what we call "low-cost ingredient." They are formulated with whatever ingredients are the cheapest at time of manufacturing, so the recipe can differ from batch to batch. They may be described as "value" or "economy" feeds. Some may not even appear on the feed company's website! The ingredients list starts with terms such as "processed grain products or by-products." You don't really know what the grain is, as it is whatever is the cheapest at the time. It's likely wheat or corn. The guaranteed analysis is short, because the manufacturer can't guarantee the levels on all the nutrients when they change up the ingredients. These are the least expensive feeds, and there is a place for them, but they aren't high performance diets.

The next level is "fixed ingredient" and is a category which costs more, has a longer guaranteed analysis, and has a more specific list of ingredients. These feeds contain the same ingredients all the time, generally in the same proportion. The ingredients are tested for nutritional value. Some variation in nutrition can happen if a particular ingredient, such as wheat, has a higher or lower value than a previous crop. Many horses do well on these types of feeds.

The highest level is "fixed nutrition." These are the most expensive feeds and feature a lengthy guaranteed analysis and a very specific ingredient list. All ingredients are tested for quality and nutritional value. The premise here is that every bag will have the same nutritional value. Because the end goal is nutrition based and not ingredient based, there may be slight tweaks in the formula. This does not mean that different ingredients are substituted, as they are in the low-cost ingredient feeds. Instead, the amount of one ingredient may be increased or decreased

slightly. Because the ingredients are so rigorously tested before production, this isn't a big deal. If you want your horse to look like a million bucks, these are the feeds that will help you get there. Make sure that you follow the bag's feeding recommendations to get the most out of your dollar.

As we close, here are a few points to consider:

Adding fat to your horse's diet or changing to a feed that is high in fat is a safe way to help your horse gain weight.

Stay away from the old practice of adding corn in the winter. It doesn't "keep your horse warm." It just increases the starch in his diet, and some horses can't deal well with that. Give him more hay instead. It will create metabolic warmth as his hindgut ferments the fiber and releases heating energy.

Remember that protein BUILDS muscle, exercise conditions it. If your horse's muscles seem to be wasting, look at the protein content of your feed and your hay. Your feed store can help you figure out how many pounds of protein that your horse is getting based on his diet. Consult your veterinarian too about health concerns.

Obviously, we can't touch on all feeding problems or issues in this short space. I would encourage you to evaluate your horse's condition now and take a hard look at your feeding routine. Spend some time watching your horse during the day, not just at mealtimes, to see what he does and how he interacts with other horses and his environment. Take a few moments to evaluate your feed and decide what your goals are for your horse. And, of course, make sure he always has access to salt and to clean water that isn't frozen. Assessing your horse's condition now, changing your management to eliminate feeding problems, and knowing what he is eating can pay big dividends this spring when he sheds out.