

You may remember having fun with “Choose Your Own Ending” books. This article is a bit like that- but instead of telling a story, we’re going to discuss feeding choices for your horse. Fix yourself a snack and take a few moments to go through this. It won’t work if you just read straight through, so answer the questions honestly and have fun! Of course, if you have serious concerns about your horse’s health, you should always consult with your veterinarian. This article isn’t intended to replace a vet visit. Nor is it intended to answer all your feeding questions. And remember, every horse is an individual and should be fed as such.

1. How does your horse look?

- a. Looking great! Good weight, good muscle, nice hair coat and good hoof quality. (Go to 4.)
- b. Looks okay but could use some fine tuning. (Go to 15.)
- c. We need help! (Go to 32.)
- d. My horse has special dietary needs. (Go to 26.)

2. Is he overweight or underweight?

- a. Yes, he’s overweight (Go to 4.)
- b. He’s underweight (Go to 4.)
- c. Nope. Weight is good. (Go to 3.)

3. Does he lack muscle?

- a. Yes (Go to 16.)
- b. No (Go to 4.)

4. Do you know how much your horse is eating IN POUNDS of feed?

- a. Yes (Go to 5.)
- b. No, I just scoop it out. (Go to 6.)
- c. I board my horse and the barn manager takes care of that. (Go to 7.)

5. Are you feeding the amount recommended on the feed bag?

- a. Yes (Go to 9.)
- b. No. I’m feeding less. (Go to 10.)
- c. No, I’m feeding more. (Go to 11.)

6. Go weigh it. (Go to 5.)

7. Go ask. Your horse, your responsibility to know what he is eating. (Go to 9.)

8. Remember that your horse should have access to clean, fresh water at all times. Make sure it isn’t frozen during the winter. Lack of water leads to dehydration, which can lead to colic.

9. Do you know how much hay your horse is eating IN POUNDS?

- a. I don’t know, he has free choice. (Go to 25.)
- b. Yes. (Go to 12.)
- c. No, I board. (Go to 40.)
- d. No. I just throw a few flakes out there. (Go to 40.)

10. If you are feeding much LESS than the bag recommends and your horse is overweight, perhaps this isn’t the right choice for your horse. He may not be getting the protein, vitamins, and minerals that he needs because

you aren't feeding the recommended amount. Consider a ration balancer to fill in his nutritional gaps. (Go to 27.) If you are feeding less than the recommended amount and he is UNDERWEIGHT, give him more. (Go to 29.) If you are feeding less than the recommended amount and he is the correct weight, he still may not be getting enough vitamins and minerals. (Go to 27.)

11. If you are feeding much MORE than the bag recommends, perhaps this isn't the right choice. After ruling out health issues, talk with your vet and feed store. If he's overweight, consider a lower calorie feed or a ration balancer. (Go to 27.) If he's underweight and you are feeding more than the recommended amount, consider adding more calories. This can be in the form of more hay, a higher fat feed, or fat supplements. Eating more forage is preferable but if he can't because of his teeth, or he won't consume enough, or other reasons, then fat is the safest way to add calories to a horse's diet. (Go to 9.) If he is the correct weight, you could consider switching to a higher calorie feed and feeding less, or you could just leave well enough alone. Or you could ask your feed store for recommendations. (Go to 9.)

12. Have you had your hay analyzed?

- a. Yes. (Go to 21.)
- b. No. (Go to 13.)

13. Get it done. The information is very valuable in helping you decide what your horse's overall diet should be. Remember that the nutrition will vary from field to field and from year to year.

- a. But I board and I don't know where the hay comes from. (Go to 39.)
- b. But I buy it from the feed store and I think it comes from different sources. (Go to 14.)
- c. Okay. How do I do that? (Go to 31.)

14. Ask someone. It may not make sense to have the hay tested if it is coming from different sources, but you may still be able to get valuable information about how the hay is trending in your area. (Go to 21.)

15. Is your horse a senior?

- a. No, he's young. (Go to 38.)
- b. Yes, he's definitely a senior. (Go to 2.)
- c. I don't know. When is a horse considered a senior? (Go to 17.)

16. Muscle wasting can be caused by many different things, and it isn't always just lack of conditioning. Age and genetics can play a huge part. Nutrition does too. How much protein is your horse eating? Is he getting the recommended amount of the proper vitamins and minerals?

- a. I don't know how much protein he's eating. (Go to 19.)
- b. I've calculated his protein intake from his feed, now what? (Go to 5.)

17. There is no age at which a horse becomes a senior. Instead, think of it this way. When what you've done in the past no longer works, and you are noticing body changes, attitude changes, stiffness, and other differences, it's time to have a talk with your vet. You may have a senior. (Go to 2.)

18. I don't know. It all seems so confusing! (Go to 33.)

19. Go do the math. The percentage of protein on the feed bag indicates how much of that bag contains protein. (Go to 4.)

20. Remember to make any changes in feed and hay over a period of time. Two weeks is good, longer than that is better for older horses or horses with food sensitivities. (Go to 33.)

21. How are his teeth?
- Good, I have them checked at least once a year. (Go to 22.)
 - I have no idea. (Go to 23.)
22. Have you had a fecal sample done by your vet, and have you dewormed him appropriately?
- Yes, I have a fecal sample done regularly and I deworm according to the results. (Go to 35.)
 - No, I have not had a fecal sample done but I do deworm regularly. (Go to 34.)
 - No and no. (Go to 24.)
23. Get this scheduled. Horses should have their teeth checked at least once a year, and more often than that if they are young, old, predisposed to dental problems, in intense training, or...we could go on and on. Get it done. (Go to 22.)
24. Get this done. While you won't be able to totally eradicate parasites, you can manage them at a level that keeps your horse healthy. Test at least twice a year, four-six times is much better. Then follow your vet's recommendation for deworming and test again. (Go to 36.)
25. Free choice hay is fine, as long as your horse doesn't just stand at a round bale all day! While a fiber-based diet is best, a horse also needs to move around to aid in his digestion. If he doesn't know when to stop eating and is gaining too much weight, consider weighing his hay and giving him meals throughout the day and using a slow-feed bag so that he doesn't just inhale his hay. (Go to 28.)
26. Consult with your veterinarian. If they recommend a certain feed, ask why, and then ask for the particulars so that you can take that information to your feed store. Then talk with someone at your feed store who is knowledgeable too. (Go to 2.)
27. Ration balancers have many uses. For horses that are on a forage only diet (hay and/or pasture), they help supply the protein, vitamins, and minerals that are lacking in the hay. For horses that are eating less than the recommended amount of feed, they fill in the nutritional gaps. They are low in calories, sugars, starches, and fiber, so they should not be considered feed. Rather, they are supplements. (Go to 9.)
28. A fiber-based diet is best. This means pasture and/or forage. A 1000-pound horse who is doing nothing needs approximately 16,000 kcals per day. If your hay contains 800 kcal per pound, then he needs 20 pounds, or 2% of his body weight just to maintain. Of course, your horse may need a bit more or a bit less, and your hay may have more or fewer calories per pound. But you won't know unless you have it analyzed. (Go to 29.)
29. While a fiber-based diet is best, active horses need more calories than their hay or pasture may be able to provide. We can add calories by adding feed and/or by adding fat supplements. (Go to 12.)
30. There are many feeds on the market, and they fill all sorts of dietary requirements. There are high-fat, low calorie, high energy, low NSC (non-structural carbs), high protein, no corn, no soy, easy to digest, complete... the list is endless. After talking with your veterinarian, have a conversation with your feed store to help you make appropriate choices. (Go to 20.)
31. Take a gallon-sized sample of hay to your local feed store and ask them to send it out for analysis. Usually, they will do it at no charge to you. Take handfuls of hay from many different bales so that you are getting a diverse sample. If they don't offer the service, try another feed store that will, or send in a sample yourself. A basic analysis isn't that expensive but will give you a lot of valuable information. (Go to 21.)

32. If you have any health concerns about your horse, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian. A vet may want to do blood tests, check teeth, check for parasites, and do other diagnostics. Be prepared to answer questions about your horse's age, activity level, past health, current diet, and more. (Go to 15.)

33. Your feed store has many resources. They usually carry several lines of feed and can help you select something appropriate, especially if you have recommendations from your veterinarian. Feed stores can also assist you in getting your hay analyzed. Ask to talk with someone who has knowledge regarding equine nutrition. And ask about loyalty programs! Many feed companies offer coupons and perks for people who use their feed.

34. It's great that you are deworming but consider stepping up your game. Traditionally we dewormed horses four-six times a year, and we rotated dewormers to prevent the parasites from becoming resistant to the anthelmintics. Now we've come to realize that a targeted approach is better. This means conducting a fecal test for the presence of parasites, deworming with the appropriate drug, managing our manure loads better, and retesting as needed. Talk about this with your veterinarian for more information and suggestions for what will work on your farm. (Go to 36.)

35. You may have determined that you and your horse and your feeding program are doing well. That's great-but remember, things work until they don't, and then it's time to think about changes. You may need to consult with your veterinarian. Remember, make changes in feed slowly. Two weeks is good, longer may be necessary. Offer fresh, clean water at all times. (Go to 33.)

36. You may have a few "to-do" items after reading this, or you may have a long list! Get them done, as even small changes can have big results. You may be surprised after reading your feed bags and having your hay analyzed. Remember, make changes in feed slowly. Two weeks is good, longer may be necessary. Offer fresh, clean water at all times. (Go to 33.)

37. Remember to offer free-choice salt at all times, either in loose form or as a brick or block. Salt is essential to many of the body's processes. Horses generally take what they need. If you suspect that your horse isn't consuming enough, talk with your vet about how much you can safely add to his feed. (Go to 41.)

38. Perhaps your feeding routine needs some tweaking. Let's start with how much he's actually consuming. (Go to 2.)

39. Ask your barn manager if the hay has been analyzed. If not, take a sample yourself and take it to the feed store. Don't worry about shaming anyone. This isn't a competition. It's a way to gather information about your horse's diet. (Go to 31.)

40. Go weigh it. If you board, go ask. (Go to 12.)

41. I know that some of you just read straight through this article...because I do that too, after I've played the game. I hope that you gathered some useful information from the dead-ends!