

The Golden Rules of Feeding Horses

Feed on a “little and often” basis.

As herbivores, horses’ digestive systems are structured on the basis of having a slow and constant flow of food passing through it. In the wild, horses spend nearly every waking hour selectively grazing, and so, where possible this is what you should attempt to emulate. 3 or even 4 smaller feeds per day is better than one big feed.

Regular small feeds stimulate saliva production. Saliva contains a buffer, protecting the stomach lining against acid attack and possible ulcer formation

Always ensure adequate roughage is available.

Roughage or forage, is pasture, hay and chaff – it should be clean and dust free. As a rule of thumb, a horse should receive approximately 2% of its body weight in roughage per day. So, for a 400kg horse, that’s 8kgs per day.

If pasture is in short supply, then you need to ensure there is plenty of hay available.

Keep to regular feeding times

Horses are creatures of habit, and they take security from having routine in their life. You should feed your horses at the same regular times each day.

Always ensure there is fresh, clean drinking water available

This one needs no further explanation!

Feed by weight, not by volume

Remember that the weight of various feeds varies greatly. For example, if the dipper you use holds 1kg of oats, then filling that same dipper with lucerne chaff will not give you a kilo of lucerne chaff – because the chaff is lighter than the oats.

Everyone should go through the exercise of taken a set of kitchen scales out to the feed shed and actually WEIGHING exactly what you feed your horse – you will often be surprised at just how inaccurate your guesses have been!

Feed each horse as an individual

Take into account the size, condition, work rate, temperament and age of the horse when preparing their feed. Also, issues such as the amount of available pasture and the weather (horses require more digestible energy in cold weather, to convert to heat for warmth) need to be considered. The difference between summer and winter temperatures can be the equivalent to as much as 2kg of concentrate feed.

Make any dietary changes gradually

If making changes to your horses diet, introducing a new feed etc, to do so gradually, over several days. The horses gut is a complex system that doesn’t adapt well to sudden changes. This also applies to when a horse is being brought into, or out of work.

Feedbins – Keep them clean and low

Feeds bin should be kept spotlessly clean. If there are any left-overs from the previous feed, remove them before adding the new feed (this is particularly relevant if the leftover feed has been wet) – and query why there was feed not eaten.

Also, where possible, keep feedbins at ground level. Horses are designed to feed with their head down, and this helps keep their airways clear.

Parasites & Teeth

Control worm infestation by regularly drenching your horse, and picking up manure and / or harrowing paddocks. Don't forget to rotate between the types of wormers you use (to prevent resistance) and include one for tapeworm at least once a year.

Having your horses teeth checked regularly by a professional (at least once a year) is also essential in ensuring they are able to properly chew (and therefore digest) their feed.

Feed Storage

Make sure feed is stored in a dry, cool environment and vermin free environment. With concentrates, open each bag as required to ensure freshness.