



Photo credit: Kalina Rutledge

Feeding In Spring: Increased Exercise And Warmer Weather

By Kalina Rutledge,
Bachelor of Bio Resource Management - Equine

Melting snow, warmer temperatures, longer days. As Canadian equestrians, we welcome spring with open arms as we begin to ride outside again and shed our layers of thick coats, gloves and boots. However, spring also brings new nutritional demands for our equine partners.

Many horses have a much lower work load during the winter when they are not focusing on the show season. For many owners, the main goal during cold winter months is to keep their horse in good body condition. The energy it takes a horse to stay warm outside during a typical winter day can actually equate to the same amount of calories used during one hour of riding. Many people ride less in winter therefore the calories their horses consume per day are focused more on keeping them warm, without creating excess attitude. Diets high in fibre and fat help horses come through winter with a good body condition while maintaining a calm demeanor.

However, as temperatures rise and the horse uses fewer calories to stay warm, energy needs change. The calorie needs must also be based on the exercise level of the horse which often increases as the show season approaches. You may also find your horse needs a new calorie type in order to have the energy to keep up with its increasing work load. Instead of a high fat and fibre diet that kept them in good weight during winter with a calm attitude, they may now require more starch in order to have the energy level you desire as you work towards an increased fitness level.

Starch is stored in muscles in the form of glycogen. Energy or fuel for muscles during exercise can be derived in three different ways. First, glucose can be taken directly from the bloodstream, which is the fastest form of energy. Second, glycogen can be brought out of storage from the muscle and converted to glucose. Third, fat can be used, but this is the slowest form of energy and it requires a more long-term endurance activity to be efficient.

Depending on the activity that you do with your horse, you may need different types of calories in order to provide them with the fuel they need. If you do long trail rides or any endurance type activity, a fat and fibre diet may still be sufficient for your horse. If you start training for jumping or barrel racing or a discipline that requires fast spurts of energy, your horse may require more starch in their diet. That way, it will have a store of glycogen ready for faster activities and also be able to replenish those muscle stores of glycogen for your next ride.

As your horse begins to work harder and now that you have decided what type of calorie it requires to do its job properly, you need to make sure it has the spark required to make that fuel burn. That spark is vitamins and minerals. A lot of people think that if their horse looks okay on the outside, it does not need any vitamins and minerals in addition to its regular feed. The outside appearance is only one small aspect of what is going

on in your horse's body. Vitamins and minerals ensure bones build and stay strong to support a horse's massive body as it lands a jump, they help muscles to properly contract and relax as powerful hindquarters dig and push while spinning a barrel and they make sure nerves are firing at full speed as a Thoroughbred blasts from the starting gate. Equilizer is a product that ensures your horse has all the essential vitamins and minerals it requires for its day-to-day function. It is perfect for horses not receiving the recommended amount of a fortified feed per day and also works alone for easy keeping horses.

Aside from physical performance, vitamins and minerals also ensure your horse's immune system is functioning at optimum level, which is necessary as it is being stressed through physical work, trailering and show jitters. A supplement like Horse Plus, which contains a broad spectrum of B vitamins as well as added antioxidants vitamins C and E, will help with the stresses that show season puts on your horse. This combination of vitamins ensures proper red blood cell formation, energy production and counteracts the stress that intense exercise is placing on your horse's body. The optimum performance that you are hoping for from your equine athlete is not possible without the proper balance of vitamins and minerals.

Show day brings with it a number of stresses and dehydration is an important one that many people overlook. Multiple factors that you may not consider can add up, contributing to dehydration in your horse. For those horse owners lucky enough to have pasture, spring is when you are transitioning your horse from a winter of eating dry hay to now grazing on pasture. If you then head to a show for the weekend and your horse is suddenly switched back to hay you may run into problems. It is important to keep in mind that hay is about 10 per cent moisture while grass is over 70 per cent moisture.

To put this into perspective, if your horse went to eating just hay it would have to drink two five-gallon buckets of water to equal the

same moisture level as if it were to eat grass instead. Also keep in mind that those two buckets are needed before your horse has even started working and sweating, which requires even more water. The low moisture level of hay, combined with the fact that a horse is less likely to drink unfamiliar water at a show, combined with water lost from sweating during performance and trailering, is a recipe for impaction colic. Hydration will be the key to preventing any problems.

Pure salt or sodium chloride is your basic electrolyte and it's the cheapest you will find. Salt licks are often not enough to ensure that your horse has adequate salt intake because they are designed for cows with rough tongues and the ability to salivate at all times. Horses, however, only salivate when eating. Loose salt added to your horse's feed is the best way to ensure that your horse will drink. At a show, if your horse is refusing to drink you can even go as far as mixing salt with water or apple sauce and syringing it into its mouth. As long as your horse always has free choice access to water, you cannot go wrong by adding loose salt to its feed.

Spring brings with it a lot of positive things for horse owners as the weather warms up and show season is on the horizon. However, it also brings changes. It is important to keep in mind how the new season and activities can create changes that may not seem obvious to you at first, but can have a bigger impact on your horse. The new season brings with it a new opportunity for you to re-evaluate the basics of your horse's diet to ensure it has everything it requires to take on new activities. Everything from calorie type to a proper balance of vitamins and minerals to hydration will play an essential role in your horse's performance. If all those bases are covered, your horse will be better equipped to do its job for you. 🌸

Kalina Rutledge is an Equine Sales Representative at Agribands Purina Canada. Visit Purina's website at www.agripurina.ca

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Laura Catalano - lcatalano@niscocanada.com

Marc Belliveau - mbelliveau@niscocanada.com

Peter Johns - pjohns@niscocanada.com

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