

Winter weight-watch

Whether you're feeding a poor-doer or a good-doer, many factors need to be considered when planning their winter ration – especially this year – discovers *Catherine Welton*

CHANGING from a summer to a winter feeding regime can be challenging, especially for owners with good- or poor-doers. This year, the impact of an unusually dry summer on hay yields and winter grazing means managing the changing seasons may require more creative solutions than usual.

"The reduced grass growth in many areas may mean that poor-doers don't have extra weight they can afford to lose this winter. These fields will also be prone to poaching, so forage will need to be supplemented sooner," explains Tracey Hammond, senior nutritionist at Dengie Horse Feeds.

"In some areas, there may be forage shortages, which could mean you have less choice over what forage you use," she adds.

This can be problematic for poor-doers if the only hay available is low-quality, or for good-doers if it's calorie rich.

Milder winters mean it's no longer possible to rely on the old adage that colder months will naturally take the pounds

off an overweight horse. And, as Vanessa Allen, nutritional content manager at Spillers points out, domesticated horses tend to be well protected from winter's natural challenges.

"The conditions that horses are kept in now means that some horses actually gain weight over winter if they're stabled more, rugged up, exercised less and fed plenty of forage," she says.

KEEPING a horse at a healthy weight all year round is preferable and regular body condition scoring is the easiest way to work out if a horse's diet needs adjusting.

"It may help to score your horse's neck, middle and hindquarters separately, and calculate an average. Horses with a large tummy may not necessarily be overweight as this could be due to lack of work, meaning their core muscles are slack, or large amounts of indigestible forage sitting in their hindgut," explains Lucy Baskfield, equine nutritionist at Baileys Horse Feeds.

"It's always important to body condition score the whole horse, to give a better idea of overall fat coverage."

Another assessment to make when winter approaches is how much energy the horse is expending, something that

Louise Scott, D&H senior nutritionist, says owners often overestimate.

"Workload can be difficult to define, and it isn't just how frequently a horse is ridden," she says. "You should also consider the type of work, the duration of each work session and the intensity of each session."

WHETHER or not a horse can easily maintain their condition, the basis of the diet should be forage. With a good-doer, the challenge is reducing the calories while making sure they're still eating enough fibre to maintain a healthy gut.

"It's important to try to do everything possible not to limit forage by first focusing on matching the right forage and composition to the needs of the horse," says Sami Hodgson, consultant registered nutritionist at Thunderbrook.

"Forage is the majority of the diet, so differences in composition turn into impactful, big differences on a day-by-day basis."

Increasing numbers of companies are offering forage analysis to give owners a clearer idea of what their hay or haylage is actually providing. But there are caveats to this, as Lucy points out.

"You can get your forage analysed, however, it's worth noting that this only provides a snapshot in time of this sample," she says. "Nutrient values can vary between bales of the same batch and between cuts, as many things affect the nutrient quality of preserved forage. Therefore, if you are going to get your forage analysed, ensure

you have at least a three-month supply of forage from the same batch."

Where hay needs to be restricted, straw can help meet the needs of some good-doers. "It can replace up to 50% of the usual forage ration but should only be fed to those with good dentition and must be introduced gradually to allow time for the digestive system to adapt," explains Tracey.

"However, the more straw is used, the more nutrients a horse will miss out on and it's important to supply quality protein in addition to vitamins and minerals. This can be achieved easily by using a feed balancer."

FOR a poor-doer, it's about ensuring the optimum uptake of calories, starting with ad lib hay or haylage.

"If voluntary hay intake is insufficient, provide additional fibre sources, such as chaff, or soaked fibre, such as Speedi-Beet or grass pellets," says Iona Robinson, Saracen's technical nutrition coordinator. "High in calories doesn't always equal fizzy. Make use of feed high in fibre and oil to support weight maintenance, while maintaining a level temperament."

Maintaining a healthy gut is key, advises Louise.

"The gut microbiome is the secret powerhouse of the horse," she says. "One of its key functions is to ferment fibre that would otherwise be indigestible to the horse. If a horse has a poor microbiome population, they are less able to digest fibre and extract the energy from it, so you will see a drop in condition."

Dos and don'ts

POOR-DOERS

- ✓ Do consider adding a digestive enhancer to ensure the maximum uptake of calories and nutrients.
- ✓ Do use alternative highly digestible fibre sources, such as chopped and pelleted grasses, chopped and pelleted alfalfa, as well as sugar beet to boost your horse's calorie intake.
- ✗ Don't assume a poor-doer with turnout is consuming enough calories. Hay may need to be fed in the field if grass is sparse or of poor quality.

GOOD-DOERS

- ✓ Do use a balancer to ensure nutritional needs are met. Mix with a low-calorie fibre source to extend chewing time.
- ✓ Do consider straw as a low-calorie partial hay replacement.
- ✗ Don't leave for long periods without forage to avoid digestive and psychological problems.
- ✓ For all types of horses, make any changes to bucket feed, turnout and forage gradually over 7-10 days.

"The best way to support a healthy gut microbiome is by feeding a fibre-first diet. Offering a variety of fibre sources in the diet supports a more diverse, healthier microbiome population. You can also support the microbiome using pre- and probiotics, which can be found in quality feeds or added through a supplement."

FOR most horses, regardless of condition, a balancer is required.

"Equines as a species would naturally consume a greater variety of nutrients, which would gradually vary throughout seasons," explains Sami. "In a domestic setting, they are much more restricted, staying in the same field spaces year-round, with grass and forages that are less biodiverse."

"To keep our horses healthy, we want to provide a diet that prevents nutritional deficiencies that can easily occur from the limited domestic diet, as well as from changes in winter months, which is why most horses need a nutritional balancer." With so much to consider – and some uncertainty around the availability of forage this winter – the key message is to plan ahead.

"Many owners start looking into a winter ration as grazing quality declines or the routine begins to change as the nights draw in," says Lucy. "The main thing that indicates a necessity to change the ration will be your horse's body condition score, their workload and if the grazing quality and quantity has declined." **H&H**

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