

What does the equine nutritionist believe?

Clare MacLeod says that two aspects come to mind when considering a feeding routine.

"Firstly, we need to think how a horse's gut works. Horses rely on microbes in the digestive tract to help them digest their food. And they need the food they eat to be consistent, day to day, to keep those gut microbes healthy."

This is why it's important not to change a horse's bucket feed suddenly, but Clare points out that the same principle applies to forage and grazing too.

"It's actually quite bad for a horse's gut to be turned out on grass one day and not the next," she says.

For any owner who can't guarantee daily field turnout, she suggests hand grazing or giving the horse some dampened chopped grass on days when he can't graze to keep his diet as consistent as possible. The same applies if the horse is taken to camp or competitions. In these situations, Clare advises taking the horse's own forage from home as his gut will be used to it.

The second aspect is behaviour.

"Horses are very good at anticipating routines. So, the best thing is either a good feeding routine that the owner sticks to, or no feeding routine at all. If your horse is at grass 24/7, it doesn't matter what time you turn up to feed him, and by not having a routine you will stop him from developing any anticipatory stress if you're late one day. Of course, if your horse is stabled sometimes you need to turn up at regular times. In fact, in this situation, it's best to stick to the same feed times every day, even at the weekends, when we love a lie-in, because the horse will be anticipating his bucket feed and could get stressed or be anxious if it's late."

Clare also believes that owners should consider the fact that horses are herd animals when it comes to a feeding routine.



When devising a feeding regime, think how the horse's gut works



Horses need quality rest and having a routine is said to help with this

"A horse's eating patterns are driven by what other herd members are doing. A horse with a poor appetite will eat more if eating in company. Studies have shown that horses get stressed if they have run out of hay and others are being fed. Therefore, if you're on a livery yard, try to synchronise feeding times with other owners, or, if you can't be there when someone else is feeding, ask them to give your horse a slice of hay or a carrot. It doesn't have to be a full bucket feed but just enough to make the horse think that he's a part of herd eating behaviour."

What does the equine sleep expert believe?

Dr Linda Greening has been researching equine sleep at Hartpury University for several years and believes that having a routine can be a factor in helping horses to get enough quality rest.

Her research has informed some changes on the yard at Hartpury.

"We have quite a few loan horses, and it can be a fairly intense environment for them, with others coming in and going out, mucking out taking place and so on. Therefore, the yard team instigated a couple of 'quiet times' on the yard at the same time every day. We think that once the horses have learnt that routine, they should start to anticipate it and use it to rest, and we are currently undertaking a study to test this theory."

Another issue to consider, especially in the winter months, is when stable lights go on and off. Horses are subject to biological rhythms, just like humans, and so they are affected by light and dark. In one of Linda's recent studies (Greening et al, 2021), she found that leaving stable lights on overnight affected the amount of sleep the horses had.

"In a more recent study investigating the effects of light, we discovered that using red lights at night didn't disturb the horses' circadian rhythms in the same way as white lights," she says. "Therefore, if you need to do a late night check on your horse it's worth thinking about using the red setting on your head torch as it's less likely to disrupt him."



A warm-up routine is vital and ensures that horses stay sounder for longer

What does the coach believe?

For coach Danny Anholt having a routine when warming up a horse is particularly important.

"Some years ago, Dr Hilary Clayton studied the effects of a structured warm-up routine, particularly in respect of the walk. Horses who were steadily and systematically warmed up before work stayed sounder for longer," Danny notes.

He has also found that practising a specific floor plan in the warm-up can become a welcome comfort blanket.

"Taking your horse to a competition takes him out of his comfort zone. Surrounded by unknown horses and people might be a challenging prospect for a natural herd animal, particularly an inexperienced horse. Our experience tells us that the moment we slot into the familiar warm-up routine, both horse and rider find solace in it."

Danny adds that there are benefits to a routine that involves hacking too.

"One significant behaviour observed in feral horses that seems to be clear evidence of their attachment to habits is the tendency to follow familiar paths and tracks. I don't see any harm in replicating this natural process by hacking familiar routes," says Danny. "Occasionally, an insecure horse may begin to nap towards home or spook in a place where he has been scared on a previous occasion, but that's where patient, systematic retraining is needed. Changing hacking routes isn't going to solve the problem."

Of course, a rider can't stick to the same exercise and training routines with their horse forever. And different horses need different routines.