

Fact Sheet



Feeding On The Road

Horses thrive on routine; yet, performance horses are subjected to a kaleidoscopic schedule of frequent travel, unfamiliar stabling, and a variety of training and competition venues. In this whirlwind of change it is imperative that feeding programmes are consistent, with respect to concentrate feeds and forages, as well as ensuring that additional extras, such as increased demands for electrolytes, are being provided.

Whether your horse is travelling in a trailer, horsebox, ferry or plane, feeding when travelling is a potentially tricky problem. On short journeys, for the experienced traveller, you will probably notice little effect, but on longer and more frequent journeys things can become a little more complicated.

All horses will react differently to travelling, some appear to take it all in their stride, while others will find the whole event extremely exciting or just traumatic and stressful. However, all horses will experience various physiological changes. Weight loss is the most common due to a combination of decreased feed intake, increased heart rate and energy expenditure caused by increased muscular activity associated with maintaining their balance during the journey. Fluid and electrolyte imbalances are part and parcel of weight loss, particularly when horses start to suffer from diarrhoea at the sight of the horsebox and during transit. Research has suggested that horses lose two to five pounds of body weight for every hour that they travel and this takes three to five days to be regained in a normal healthy horse.

The physiological and mental stresses of travelling, coupled with the risk of dehydration that can potentially lead to colic, means that it is important to identify and minimise the stress of the situation so that you allow for greater overall health and well being, so that the horse has the greatest chance of performing well and reaching its full potential.

The preparation for this begins at home:

ALWAYS ensure that your horse has access to plenty of fresh clean water and keep buckets and troughs clean.

How much does your horse weigh? This is critical information, as you need to know your horses 'fighting' weight or the weight that he performs best at with regards to fitness, recovery and endurance. This will also enable you to work out how much weight you will need to replace once he returns from a long journey before you take him out again. Using a weight tape on a fortnightly basis will give you an indication of any weight fluctuations but if you are a serious competitor with a busy show schedule it is well worth using a weighbridge. Most veterinary practices have these.

Your horse's diet should be based on good quality forage (pasture, hay or haylage). This not only helps to keep his digestive system healthy but helps to stimulate saliva production, which is an important buffer against gastric ulcers. Eating forage also stimulates water consumption, and fibre in the hindgut traps water and electrolytes forming a reservoir of fluid, which will help to prevent dehydration. Ideally, a horse should be eating 1-1.5% of its bodyweight as forage.

Make sure that the concentrate feed you are using is the right type for the job that you are doing, this all helps in ensuring that, in conjunction with the correct fittening programme, your horse is being given the best possible start. Do not feed by yogurt pot or coffee mug but weigh your feed accurately to ensure that your horse is receiving optimum levels of vitamins and minerals etc, which are essential to help drive energy cycles and support the immune system etc. Top up with a feed balancer or a vitamin and mineral supplement if you are feeding below the feed manufacturer's recommended feeding amounts.



For those who know what they're on.



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- Salt is one of the only minerals that horses have an indisputable appetite for so, to a degree, will show nutritional wisdom. Make sure your horse has access to a salt block and supplement his feed with 2-6 ounces of salt depending upon work levels and weather conditions etc.
 - When horses are travelling or at a show they can be reluctant to drink strange water. Start practising at home by encouraging your horse to drink flavoured water, for example, flavoured with apple juice or mint. Alternatively make sure that you have enough water containers on board to take enough 'home' water with you.
 - On the day of competition, as far as possible, try to keep feeding routines as normal as possible. In the event of very early starts, let your horse eat his breakfast at least an hour before you go and don't start the lorry until he has finished!
 - It is important that he is given some forage to eat while on his journey. Any journey or event that causes excitement causes the release of Cortisol, a stress hormone, which can suppress the immune system, leaving your horse open to infection or disease. Because of the confined space and humidity, inhalation of dust and mould spores can lead to respiratory challenge, so soaked hay or haylage are better forages for travelling. Their higher water content also helps to reduce dehydration.
 - If you are on a long journey then you will need to make regular water stops, at least every two hours. Most horses will sweat when travelling due to the heat produced in a confined space, so water supplemented with electrolytes is important. Make sure you also offer un-supplemented water too.
 - If your horse is reluctant to drink while travelling then offer a soaked bran mash or some soaked sugar beet. These usually do the trick!
 - Once you are at your destination make sure that water is still made continually available.
 - Allow your horse to regularly pick at the grass or nibble his haynet to keep up saliva production.
 - Feeding approximately 500 grams of alfalfa prior to riding or competing is a useful aid in the prevention of development of ulcers.
 - If you are at an all day event, avoid feeding concentrate feed closer than 4 hours before you compete. Picking at forage is ok.
 - Continually check for signs of depression, reluctance to eat or drink, increased respiratory or heart rate, or decreased urination. All these signs may indicate dehydration, and in which case veterinary help should be sought immediately.
 - Allow your horse to cool down and relax before you re-load him for home and again keep offering the water and electrolytes or a sloppy feed.
 - Once at home the best option is to turn your horse out on to some good grass and let him unwind before feeding etc. You may need to use a rug depending upon weather conditions to prevent him from getting a chill. Time in the paddock after a long journey not only helps to relax tense muscles but also encourages better water intake and appetite stimulation.
 - Don't forget to weigh your horse on arrival home so that you can strategically feed to replace energy and nutrient stores.
 - If your horse is going to have some time off then remember to halve his concentrate feed if he is on a high energy cereal based feed. If he is on a fibre based diet and can be turned out then he can remain on full rations.
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