

Taking the Guesswork Out of Nutrition

By Carolyn Oppenheimer, DVM

Everyone has an opinion about what to feed your horse; feed store employees, farriers, trainers, the girl that has a lesson on Wednesdays... While some of these information sources are more valid than others, it is important to filter this information appropriately. Your veterinarian is your greatest ally when it comes to your horse's health, including nutrition! The potential problem with other information sources is that they tend to present all evidence and reports as equally important and this is not true. Veterinarians are trained to critically evaluate the research and literature as well as any anecdotal evidence. While nutrition is often taken for granted, a critical look at the diet may reveal that either a horse is being fed too much, too little, or a higher amount of a specific nutrient than is required for its work level, life stage, or metabolism.

That being said, your veterinarian will have difficulty giving specific recommendations without detailed information about your horse. A weight tape estimate is helpful to establish how much if any weight gain or loss is necessary. A scale is more accurate but a weight tape can still be useful. Serial monitoring with a weight tape is simple and serial photographs can be helpful as well to monitor progress. Along with getting a weight estimate, a body condition score should be assigned. Usually these are done on a scale of 1-9 with 1 being emaciated, 5-6 being ideal, and 9 being obese. The ribs should be easily palpable though preferably not visible, and there should not be excess fat on the crest of the neck, behind the shoulder, and the tail head. Body condition score (BCS) charts with images can be downloaded from reputable sources online (one link is listed below). It is good practice to try assigning a BCS to your horse and compare that to what

your veterinarian assigns. If there is a difference, ask her to discuss it with you so you can become more accurate.

After evaluating his or her body condition, the next step is to figure out how much your horse is eating. An essential tool for weighing feed and hay is an inexpensive fish scale. Half a scoop is not descriptive enough due to differences in feed weights and scoop size. Write down everything that your horse is fed per day (hay, treats, grain), how much (in lbs. preferably), and how often. Also, include how much time is spent on grass. Keep any supplement containers with the label and save any feed bags and the feed tag with the ingredients and guaranteed analysis for your veterinarian to evaluate.

Then consider how much your horse is exercised, any health issues or concerns, and your goals for him. Think of how many times he is ridden weekly, for how long, and the type of work (e.g. galloping cross-country or schooling First Level dressage). List any health problems (especially laminitis, endocrine or metabolic problems, liver problems etc.) so those may be taken into consideration as well.

A comprehensive look at your horse's lifestyle, health status, and goals should be considered to adequately address his nutrition. By gathering all this information ahead of time and alerting your veterinarian that you'd like a nutrition consult, you can expedite the process and make it more likely that you'll get the information and results out of it that you desire.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email info@brandonequine.com with any questions regarding this topic.

The Horse Body Condition Score Poster <http://www.thehorse.com/free-reports/30154/equine-body-condition-score-poster>