



Ask the Vet
February, 2014
By Kathy Jordan, DVM
(864) 972-9994

How should I feed my horse? My older two are losing weight despite getting bermudagrass hay and equine senior each day.

We are seeing a lot more thin horses (and other livestock) this year. This is most likely due to poor hay quality. Since it rained so much last summer, farmers were not able to cut their hay until it was overmature. (Hay won't dry out properly if it rains on it after it is cut, so farmers had to wait to cut the hay until it was forecasted to be dry weather.) Because of this, many people are feeding the same amount of hay that they purchased at the usual location and are finding their horses are losing weight.

The first step to getting increased weight gain is to make sure your horses have all the hay they want. This is a simple step that is often overlooked. With medium to good quality hay, a square bale per horse per day is often needed. I find many people are feeding only half of this. The second step is get your hay analyzed to determine if it is adequate in nutrition. This can be done for under \$25 at the Clemson Diagnostic Laboratory. Ask for the analysis to determine TDN and protein levels. It is also nice to check mineral levels but that is less critical. Your veterinarian can help you analyze the hay results to determine if it is adequate for your particular horse. We do this at no charge for our clients (assuming we have examined your horse(s) in the past year). There is no one TDN or protein level that is needed for all horses – it is based on your individual horse's needs.

The third step is to analyze how much senior feed or sweet feed you are giving your horse. Check the bag for a starting point of how much to feed. Feeds like Purina Equine Senior are very high fiber feeds that can be fed as a complete diet (ie you could feed no hay and just give large amounts of the feed). Because of this, they are not particularly high energy or high fat. Therefore you need to feed a LOT of them. For instance, a half bag (25 lbs) per day might be an appropriate amount for an average sized horse. I find many people are feeding 5 lbs per day, just as they might feed a high energy feed like Omelene.

We have rehabbed a lot of thin horses at CARE, the rescue I founded. I have found the most cost effective way to keep weight on a thin horse is to feed unlimited good quality Bermuda or fescue hay along with alfalfa cubes or pellets. The alfalfa cubes/pellets can be purchased at most feed supply stores. I start with 5 lbs per head twice daily and work up to all they will eat. This usually ends up being around 25 lbs per horse per day. I also add in Safe Choice feed (this is a low sugar feed so less likely to cause founder than most other feeds)

and give 1 scoop (about 2-3 lbs) twice daily. I start them on ½ scoop twice daily for a week before going up to 1 scoop twice daily.

Last but not least, have your vet come examine your horses to see if they may have intestinal parasites, dental disease, or some other cause for weight loss. When we come out to do the exam, we will also customize a feeding plan for you.

We also want to let everyone know that we have an associate veterinarian, Dr. Courtney Culbertson, joining our practice in mid-February. She enjoys working with all species and has a special interest in equine medicine. We will have more details about our expanded equine practice in the March Fair Town Times issue.