

Winter Feeding Horses at grass

Zoe Davies MSc.Eq.S.,R.Nutr.

Forage is vital for horses but unfortunately the nutritional quality of forage in pasture varies tremendously throughout the year, from very good (or too good) in spring and summer to poor in winter. As the cold winter nights draw in and the temperature falls, pasture stops growing and eventually (if cold enough) becomes dormant. This pasture may look green and plentiful but actually contains indigestible woody fibre and fewer vitamins with a much-reduced feed value. This also means that the horses' energy intake from pasture falls and they can consequently lose weight quickly, as more dietary energy is needed just to maintain body temperature. In general, it is a good idea to plan ahead and begin offering smaller quantities of hard feed and conserved forage such as hay or haylage in late autumn, so that the digestive system adapts, minimizing the risk of digestive upsets.

Fortunately there are however, ways we can provide extra calories and this is by feeding concentrates which will also provide much needed amino acids, minerals and particularly vitamins that may be lacking in winter pasture and hay or haylage.

The choice of hard feed will depend upon the factors such as;

- Condition of the horse or pony
- Workload
- Age - stage of breeding cycle or veteran horses and ponies

If more calories are required a higher energy compound feed and/or oil may be fed. This includes underweight horses and ponies, breeding stock and working horses, which will need additional higher energy hard feed or concentrates to help them gain or maintain condition.

For horses and ponies in optimum condition going into winter, Gain Cool n Easy Mix should be fed or if a lower starch feed is preferred, Gain Easy Go cubes. If horses and ponies need more condition and more energy is needed, the next step up would be Gain Hi Grade Horse and Pony cubes. For breeding mares, Gain Stud cubes or Gain Coarse Stud Mix will provide the nutrients they need over winter.

The choice for very good doers and overweight types, would be a low calorie balancer such as Opti-Gro, which will provide the vitamins and minerals required over winter.

It is important to remember that hay, haylage and concentrates etc., all contain less water than fresh grass and so horses in the cold winter months will need to drink more. This is important if impaction colic is to be avoided. As water temperature falls horses drink less and so if possible, hot water should be added to take the chill off drinking water. A salt block is important as forage can be low in salt and this should be made freely available if more salt is required.

To summarise choose a compound feed from Gain Horse Feeds that suits your horses needs to maintain condition and health over the winter months.