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WINTER FEED CHANGES

For some horses' winter may involve an increase in workload, for others it means time off, combine this with environmental changes (such as colder temperatures and poorer grazing) it is understandable why diet can play a big part in winter.

Loss of weight in winter is always a concern for many owners, and therefore it must be noted that increased energy demands as a result of increased work and/or cold weather and the reduced nutrition of pastures generally means horses may need more feed (this includes hay, grazing and concentrate feed) during winter than in summer months in order to maintain body condition.

All warm-blooded animals, including horses, have a lower critical temperature (LCT). This is the temperature below which a horse must produce extra heat to maintain its core body temperature (ie when a horse may start to feel cold). This critical temperature varies, depending upon the horse's condition, age and if it is adapted to colder temperatures or not. For mature horses in good condition, who are accustomed to a mild climate the critical temperature may be around 0-5°C. This means that any environmental temperature drop below 5-0°C will require the horse to produce extra heat, and this will require the use of more energy. Mature horses that are unclipped and are accustomed to cold climates may have a critical temperature of as low as -15oc. Its also been seen that LCT may

even change during the winter period once the horse becomes accustomed to the colder temperatures.

These critical temperatures are important as horses require a total feed increase to provide more energy/calories, as the ambient temperature falls below the horses critical temperature. Its estimated that 15-20% more feed will be needed for each 10-15°C that the ambient temperature falls below critical temperature in order to produce the extra heat required.

As temperatures in SA don't always reach these lower levels an increase in feed may not be needed for the average horse.

Feed more hay

It might be tempting to simply increase the daily concentrate intake because it is the simplest way to add more calories and to meet the additional 15% that would mean an increase of just 525g per day (for a horse getting 3.5kg of concentrate) and so its clear that it doesn't involve large amounts of additional food.

However, as the general concern in winter is ensuring the horse is provided with added calories to maintain temperatures (stay warm) providing a diet high in fibre is a good way to do that.

The fermentation process of fibre within the gut produces more heat than it would from a concentrate meal, so rather than increasing concentrate feed we should always look at providing more roughage first to help horses in the winter months. Added (over and above their normal amount) roughage will also provide additional energy/calories, with the added benefit of being healthier for the gut.

If possible, look for more immature hay (characterised by soft stems and a larger portion of leaf matter) rather than overly mature (very stalky with little leaf) as this provides better nutritional value. This is important during the winter as winter forage often has a reduced quality which means more hay would need to be provided than in summer to ensure the same calorie value, so factor that in when purchasing.

Immature, leafy, hay, also has a water-holding capacity that more mature hay does not have. Impaction colic can be more common in winter when horses often drink less because of cold water that is not palatable or even water that is frozen and so this can help combat this.

Looking at concentrates

Keeping warm in low temperatures uses a lot of energy/calories and so for some (older, younger, poor doers) they may need more energy than can be provided from added hay alone and so a suitable concentrate will need to be considered. Horses that experience an increase in workload in winter may also need to have their energy levels adjusted with a change in concentrate also.

Adding extra energy/calories can be done in several ways:

1. *Increasing the current feed. This is perfectly fine for those not receiving much feed (0.25-0.75% of body weight or 1.25kg- 3.5kg of feed for a 500kg horse) and a simple increase may be all that's needed, as we said before for the average horse a small increase of 500g-1kg may be enough.*
2. *By changing feed- for horses working harder in winter or for those that are being fed higher amounts of food currently, changing the feed to one which contains a higher energy/calorie level per kg is more advisable. This will allow more energy to be provided while keeping within recommended amounts. This allows kg amounts to be kept down while still providing more energy, thus avoiding the trap of simply adding more and more kg to the horses diet.*

If the concern is that the horse may become "hot" temperament wise, then look towards a feed that provides a higher energy level per kg

but that uses high fat and fibre sources. This will help provide more but in a calming fashion.

If a feed change is not possible or necessary (perhaps the horse does well on his current feed) but more calories are needed in winter then this can be done by providing additional oil. Feeding for coat condition would require 50-100ml but feeding for additional energy/calories would need a level of 150ml-300ml per day to assist. Added oil also helps to provide "Calm" calories and so won't heat a hot horse.

For horses looking at a reduction in work during winter changes to the diet may also need to be considered. For the average a simple decrease in concentrate amount will be enough, however if the horse is a good doer and going from hard to no work it may be time to decrease concentrates or remove completely and replace with a balancer type product to ensure that the daily essentials are still provided.

Consider additional extras

Keep in mind that poorer quality winter hay can also have a reduced vitamin and mineral content. It therefore may be wise to consider a balancer product for younger and older horses to increase their levels without changing the diet hugely or for those horses being fed under the recommend daily amount of concentrates.

Forage extenders (also known as partial hay replacers) are designed to replace a portion of the forage in the horse's total daily diet in times when hay or grazing may be of poorer quality or not available at all. Forage extenders are available in many forms such as super fibres (soya hulls and beet pulp) or chopped hay options (chaffs and cubes). Great examples are the **Equus Nice n Easy** and **Equus Lucerne Cubes**.

These contain first grade Teff and Lucerne to provide additional fibre for all classes of horses. They do contain added vitamins and minerals and are therefore more complete than some chaffs. The vitamin and mineral fortification, however, is not as high as standard concentrates, making them usable at higher levels if needed or alongside additional feedstuffs.

Hay cubes are also an ideal alternative for horses with specific issues such as:

- *Respiratory problems as it limits their exposure to inhalation of dust.*
- *Those struggling with inflammatory disorders of the bowel, as long-stemmed hay can irritate the gut.*
- *Horses with dental issues as they often struggle to chew and digest long stemmed hay and chaffs.*

TESTIMONIALS

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