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Wow, I walked into the feed store the other day and couldn't figure out what to feed my horse. The options which have become available over the last few years are amazing. I hope the following guidelines will help you choose between the many feed choices.

First off what does your horse require? Any feed program should be based on lots of good quality hay. In our area grass hays are the easiest and cheapest to come by. These hays are typically lower in protein and calories but provide excellent fill for most horses. I often equate them to popcorn with no toppings. Be aware that some horses have recurrent impaction colic problems from these hays due to their small stem size. We recommend gradually introducing your horse to this type of hay while adding salt to their diet to increase water intake.

Alfalfa is often an excellent hay choice for horses which have trouble maintaining weight. This hay is 5-10% higher in protein levels than grass hays so they provide loads of extra calories. If your horse is moderately easy to keep weight on or requires a little extra something on top of grass hay, a blended grass/alfalfa hay, such as orchard grass/alfalfa, may be the perfect answer. Whichever hay you choose your horse should consume 2-3% of their body weight in hay or pasture per day. For most horses that is 20 to 30 pounds of roughage daily.

OK on to the grain. Grain is not necessary for all horses. If your horse is an extremely "easy keeper" (gains weight when they look at food), a protein/vitamin/mineral supplement may be all you need to feed. These supplements allow you to feed very few calories but fulfill all daily vitamin and mineral needs. In this area many middle aged horses can be maintained in the summer on one of these supplements.

How about the middle of the road horse that requires some grain? Metabolic and nutrition research over the last few years has

vastly improved our knowledge of how horses utilize feed. One of the biggest things we have learned is most horses do better eating more fat and less carbohydrates. This knowledge has created an entire new group of feeds for the easy keeper. These feeds are high in fiber and very low in soluble carbohydrates (sugars). Based on the caloric needs of the targeted horse for the diet, fat is added to increase calorie content. For instance, a pleasure horse used occasionally may do very well on a 10% protein, 8-10% fiber, 3% fat diet while a horse ridden 4-5 days per week would do great if the fat were 10%.

The hard keeper has also benefited from this new research. We have found that horses can digest an amazing amount of fat, so some of the calories provided by grains are replaced by vegetable oils. In addition, fat has a natural calming effect unlike the high levels of soluble carbohydrates in most grains. The new knowledge about sugars has also led to reduced levels in diets for hard keepers.

Geriatric horses are their very own category. They often do best with a combination of increased fat, higher fiber and lower levels of soluble carbohydrates. The Senior feeds available today do an excellent job providing the older horse with easy to chew, highly digestible nutrition.

No matter the diet, a free choice trace mineral loose salt or salt block should be available at all times to help your horse balance any deficiencies. As for all the other supplements on the market, most horses on a complete balanced diet do not require any additions to their diet. Since we are talking about diet, it is only prudent to also mention that regular dental care will increase your horse's ability to chew and digest their food.

Feel free to call us anytime for help formulating the perfect feeding program for your horse.