

OUR EXPERT PANEL



ALEXANDRA WESKER
Alex writes and consults on equine well-being and nutrition. She has a BSc and MSc in Animal Science and wrote the book *Natural Feeding for Horses*.



NICOLA WATERMAN
Nicola works for Hale Veterinary Hospital in Chippenham, Wilts. She qualified at Bristol University and previously worked in Lambourn, Berks.



JUSTINE HARRISON
As a certified equine behaviourist, Justine uses the science of behaviour to help owners understand and solve a wide range of issues with their horses.

Why won't she eat up?

Q My Thoroughbred is easily distracted from her feed, and won't eat up if there's something going on at the yard – which there often is. I'm worried as she is losing weight. How can I increase her interest in food?

Katie Crawford, Croydon, Surrey

ALEXANDRA SAYS You can make it more palatable by feeding bananas, carrots or chunks of apple (cut to prevent choking).

She might be more interested in feed of a different structure, such as mash or muesli mix.

Adding herbs can help: horses generally love them, especially mint. Sugar or molasses are tasty, but can cause dental problems or may make her picky about her feed in the future.

You can add extra calories by adding oil, increasing the amount gradually, by one tablespoon a day.

Further actions need to be taken if more than 100ml per day is fed, or choose a high energy,



Feeding oil is a good way of increasing calories

low sugar/starch feed.

Decrease distraction by feeding at less busy times or in a different location. Play music to make sudden noises blend in. If possible, feed her while others are fed, to encourage her to show the same behaviour. Get a dentist to check there is no dental reason for reduced feed intake.

Can he live on fibre?

Q My Irish Sports Horse currently has a bucket feed twice a day, but I'd like to phase this out and give him more of a fibre-based diet. Would this be suitable,

and what advice can you give me to make the transition a success?

Alison Edwards, Bolton, Lancs

ALEXANDRA SAYS

You should replace hard feed with about 1-1.5 times as much roughage, if it provides less than 10MJ of energy per kilogram, or with 2-2.5 times as much roughage if it provides more than 10MJ per kilogram.

Check the feed bag for this information, or contact an equine nutritionist if you need help working it out.

Make dietary transitions gradually and keep a close eye on your horse and his condition. If his bodyweight remains stable, then energy and protein content is sufficient.

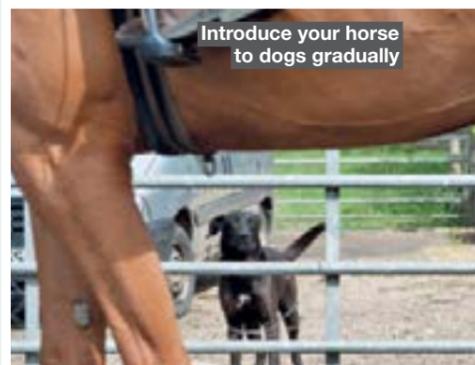


Check the nutritional content of roughage

He has a dog phobia

Q I've had my horse two years, but recently moved to a new area where there is great hacking on local commons. Unfortunately, the area is also popular with walkers and I've discovered my horse is frightened of dogs. Can you help?

Holly Burton, Torquay, Devon



Introduce your horse to dogs gradually

JUSTINE SAYS Many horses are fearful of dogs – either because of a previous bad experience, or they have never met one.

The good news is you can address your horse's fears and resolve the issue by using a plan to gradually introduce him to dogs, in controlled circumstances.

Ask a qualified behaviourist to help you, as if for any reason the horse's fear is reinforced, he could become more anxious.

In the meantime, for your safety, avoid hacking where you may meet dogs. If there are dogs on the yard and meeting one is unavoidable, ensure you remain calm and stay as far away from the dog as you can.

Distracting your horse by feeding him something yummy can help if you meet something scary, so carry treats in case.



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TIP from the TOP
Oil is the most efficient way to increase energy to a diet. It provides twice as much energy per gram as sugar!

Avoiding ulcers

Q My ex-racehorse had ulcers when I got him. He was treated and I haven't had any problems since. He's fed a high-fibre diet and has 24/7 access to grass or hay. Is a horse who's had ulcers more prone to getting them again? What else can I do to keep him ulcer free?

Lara Vale, by email

NICOLA SAYS If a horse has developed gastric ulcers previously, and no changes are made to the horse's routine after successful treatment, there is a high chance that the ulcers will recur.

However, in this case, your horse has obviously had a change in routine.

The fact he had ulcers before doesn't increase the chance of ulceration occurring again, if you remove the factors that caused them.

However it is important to note that horses can develop ulcers in the absence of common

risk factors. Therefore, it is important to monitor all horses for signs of gastric ulcers and to contact your vet if you have any concerns:

It sounds as though you have your horse on a good, high-fibre diet, which is very important. I have listed below some more tips for preventing equine gastric ulcers:

- Cut down on high-carbohydrate diets, and mix any carbohydrates with plenty of fibre.
- Use a gastric supplement during high risk periods, such as illness, box rest, travelling, long-term medication and intense exercise.
- Feed a small amount of hay before exercise. This may help keep the acid in the lower part of the stomach, away from the upper sensitive portion.
- Keep your horse's stress as low as possible – ensure he can see and/or socialise with other horses at all times and keep to a routine where possible.

Adding interest to his diet

Q I want to add interest to my good doer's diet as he is only fed hay in the winter. What do you suggest?

Harriet Kennedy, by email

ALEXANDRA SAYS The best thing you can do is give your horse unlimited roughage.

If you aren't feeding him ad lib hay, then you should give him more. You may need to find hay of a lower nutritional content to prevent weight gain.

If your horse is kept with others who are given hard feed in a bucket, then he may get

jealous, stressed and show aggressive or stereotypic behaviour.

To prevent this, you can consider feeding him low-energy grass pellets instead of concentrates. If you want to take it a step further, you can make him a custom-made mix of vegetables, fruits, bran and alfalfa to create a mash with water.

Feeding the bran and alfalfa together should improve the mineral balance of the mash. But avoid feeding more than a handful of each, as alfalfa can easily provide too much energy for your good-doer.

Help – he's scared!

Q My horse is terrified of everything. I've spent three years taking things slowly and he trusts me, but I've only ridden him once and he panicked. He is fine with a saddle, but not with a human. Is this something I can overcome?

Name and address withheld

JUSTINE SAYS Addressing behavioural issues needs a lot of time and patience.



Using a reward-based approach can resolve most issues

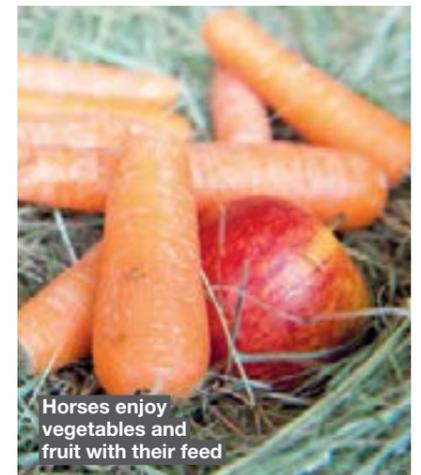
If a horse has been previously abused or traumatised, it really depends on the individual and their experience as to how far they can be rehabilitated.

However, I believe that if a horse is pain free you can resolve most issues, as long as you use a reward-based approach.

Take things slowly and progress at the horse's pace. If he has panicked when you tried to ride him, it may be that you asked for too much, too soon.

First, you need to rule out any physical issues and ensure his tack fits well.

Then go right back to square one and re-back him. I recommend getting a qualified behaviourist to help you.



Horses enjoy vegetables and fruit with their feed