

HEALTHY FARMS LARGE

ANIMAL VETERINARY SERVICES



ALISON CORNWALL DVM

HEALTHYFARMSVET@GMAIL.COM

979 US ROUTE 2, MIDDLESEX, VT 05602 WWW.HEALTHYFARMSVET.COM 802.505.9639

Feeding Horses Pelleted Feeds for Maintenance of Condition.

Many horses become thin at some point during their lives. The three major causes of weight loss in horses are 1) Age. Older horses are more difficult to keep weight on. This is often largely because of reason 2) Teeth. Horses use their teeth to grind their food and, if because of age (they lose their teeth!) or poor dental conformation the horse's teeth cannot effectively grind their food, they will not digest hay and grass properly and will lose weight. The third reason is 3) Not Enough Food. This may seem obvious, but hay quality is highly variable and difficult to detect visually. Many times an owner is feeding plenty of hay, but is not digestible when tested by a lab. Also, some horses are not getting enough hay. It can be deceptive just how much hay a horse needs. See #3 below.

What to do if you have a thin horse:

- Make sure to have your veterinarian do a complete physical exam and check your horse's teeth and float them if necessary. Very old horses may have lost teeth and no amount of floating will help.
- Especially if your horse is young or old, get a fecal exam!! If he has parasites, deworm him per your vet's guidelines. Zimectrin Gold or Equimax will kill tapeworms as well as most other parasites. Do NOT use Quest in the thin horse.
- Consider that horses need 1-2% of their body weight daily in dry feed. This is 10-20 lbs of dry hay or pellets for a 1000 lb horse. Weigh what you are feeding and make sure that your horse is getting enough good quality feed.
- Confirm that he has no competition for feed. Some horses are low on the totem pole and simply can't fight their way to the feeder!
- Have your hay tested if the quality of your hay is suspect. Poulin Grain and Blue Seal both will do this for free through your feedstore.

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If your veterinarian recommends adding pelleted feed to the diet:

- Try alfalfa pellets or another hay pellet. Low sugar senior feeds are fine also, but I really like hay pellets instead of ground grain products. Tractor supply carries timothy pellets that are 12% protein. Guy's Farm and Yard in Montpelier works hard to keep hi-protein alfalfa pellets in stock; alfalfa pellets should be >15% protein. Grain based pellets are not as healthy for your horse as hay pellets are. Beet pulp is fine if you prefer it, but has lower protein and higher sugar generally than alfalfa pellets. I prefer hay pellets (NOT cubes) because they are ground and pressed which makes them very digestible. Beet pulp is not as finely ground as a pellet so is less digestible than a pellet. Beet pulp also tend to be higher in sugars unless you drain the soak water and dump it before feeding.
 - How much pelleted feed to give depends on the horse and the season. Again, most horses need about 2% of body weight per day in dry feed, so 20 lbs of feed for a 1000# horse (or a horse who should be 1000#). If your horse is still eating a lot of hay and the weather is warm, I would recommend beginning with 2-5 lbs per day of pellets dry, then add water as described. In the winter, I usually go with 5-8 lbs of added pellets for a thinner horse who still eats a lot of hay. For a horse who eats little hay, however, you will need to feed his entire ration as pellets. Usually 15-20 lbs per day of alfalfa or timothy pellets for a 1000# horse.
- Weigh your pellets to get an idea of how much volume a given weight represents. Start with 1 lb of hay pellets and work up to the target amount of pellets daily over 2-3 weeks. Put the pellets in a bucket, cover with warm water, and then dump them into a large muck bucket and feed immediately. Dumping the wet pellets into a bigger tub will make it easier for your horse to eat his meal and will help you reduce waste from him knocking the too-full bucket over.
- If you horse can still eat some hay, let him have as much as he wants (there should be hay available all the time or he should be on good pasture).
- Make sure that any other horses are not stealing your thin horse's food!
- You should start to see weight gain in 4-8 weeks.

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If pellets are not enough, vegetable oil can be added at the rate of 1 cup per 1000# per day. You should begin at ¼ cup and take 7-10 days to increase to 1 cup per 1000# per day.

If you do not see weight gain with these changes, call your veterinarian for a follow up appointment. Additional diagnostics (like testing for parasites or Cushing's disease) may be necessary to diagnose why your horse is not gaining weight.