

What working horses need from feed

Working horses need a ration that supports effort without upsetting digestion, body condition, or behaviour. The right feed should match the horse's **energy requirements** to the actual **working load**, while still keeping the diet centred around **forage**. A *forage-first* approach helps maintain normal **gut function**, supports **forage quality** as a key part of the diet, and reduces reliance on large amounts of **hard feed**.

A useful starting point is the horse's **condition score**, or more accurately the **body condition score**. This tells you whether the horse is maintaining, losing, or gaining **bodyweight**. A working horse that looks fit but is dropping condition may need more **metabolisable energy**, more digestible nutrients, or a better **balanced ration** rather than simply larger portions of the same feed. If the horse is carrying too much condition, the ration may need adjusting to support **weight maintenance** without excess calories.

For most horses, **forage** remains the foundation of the diet because it supports **digestibility**, chewing time, and saliva production. Good **hay** or **haylage** can provide a substantial share of daily energy needs, especially when the horse's workload is light to moderate. A reputable **horse feed company UK** should be able to explain how its feeds complement forage rather than replace it.

Understanding workload and energy demand

The right feeding plan depends on the horse's **working load**. A horse in **light work** may only need a modest increase in calories above maintenance, while a horse in **moderate work** or **hard work** will need a more carefully designed ration to meet rising **energy requirements**. The goal is not simply to add more feed, but to supply the right kind of energy for the job.

In **light work**, many horses can stay in reasonable condition with good forage and a small amount of compound feed or a **ration balancer**. In **moderate work**, you may need to increase **calorie intake** with feeds that offer **slow-release energy** and enough protein for support and recovery. In **hard work**, the horse may need a more concentrated ration to maintain **stamina**, muscle function, and overall **performance**.

A key principle is to match feed type to workload rather than **equine metabolic syndrome diet feed** than using a one-size-fits-all approach. The horse's appetite, bodyweight, recovery after exercise, and **condition** all offer clues. If a horse is working more but not coping well on the current ration, it may not be getting enough energy density or the right nutrient profile. The aim is to support the horse as a true **performance horse**, not simply keep the bucket full.

Key nutrients in a working horse ration

When assessing a ration, look beyond the headline name and focus on the nutrient profile. The main components for working horses are **digestible fibre**, **starch**, **protein**, and **fat**. Each plays a different role in energy supply, recovery, and overall health.

Digestible fibre is valuable because it provides **slow-release energy** while helping support **gut health**. Fibre-based feeds can be especially useful for horses that need fuel without excessive fizz. **Starch**, on the other hand, is a quick source of energy and can be helpful for horses with higher work demands, though it needs to be managed carefully to avoid digestive upset. A ration with too much starch may compromise **gut health** and increase the risk of problems such as **colic**.

Protein is important for **muscle repair**, tissue replacement, and maintaining topline. Working horses need enough quality protein to recover from exercise and preserve condition, but more is not always better. **Fat**, often supplied through **oil**, is a concentrated source of energy that can help increase calorie density without adding too much starch. It is especially useful where a horse needs more fuel but does not tolerate high-grain feeding well.

Good feeds also supply **vitamins** and **minerals**, which support many body systems, including immunity, metabolism, and recovery. For horses sweating during exercise, **electrolytes** are important for maintaining **electrolyte balance** and supporting performance. A well-designed **balanced ration** should bring all these elements together in the right proportions.

Choosing the right feed format

The physical format of the feed can influence intake, ease of feeding, and how the ration fits with the horse's existing diet. Common formats include **nuts**, **mixes**, **cubes**, and **pellets**. None is automatically best; the right choice depends on the horse, workload, and preferences around **palatability** and ease of management.

Nuts are often chosen for their uniform shape and straightforward feeding. **Mixes** can be useful for horses that benefit from a more varied texture, though they may allow more selective eating if not managed carefully. **Cubes** are practical and generally easy to measure, while **pellets** are often efficient for delivering a consistent nutrient profile in a compact form.

When comparing formats, check the **feed label** and consider how the product fits into the rest of the ration. A feed that is high in fibre and oil may suit a horse needing steady energy, while a more cereal-based product may suit a horse with higher energy demands. The best choice is the one that supports the horse's condition, appetite, and workload without causing digestive issues.

How to balance forage, water, and hard feed

A strong feeding plan starts with forage. **Hay** and **haylage** provide the bulk of many horses' diets and should be assessed before increasing concentrate feed. If forage is poor in quality or limited in quantity, the horse may struggle to maintain condition even if hard feed is increased. That is why **forage quality** matters so much in a **balanced ration**.

Water is just as important as feed. Adequate **water intake** supports digestion, temperature regulation, and recovery after exercise. Horses that work hard or sweat heavily may need to drink more to maintain hydration and support **gut health**. If water intake is reduced, fibre digestion can be affected and the risk of digestive upset rises.

Hard feed should be used to top up nutrients and energy, not to replace forage. A forage-led diet helps maintain normal gut fill and supports more stable digestion. The best ration usually combines forage with a measured amount of concentrate feed, allowing the horse to meet energy needs while keeping the digestive tract working efficiently.

Common feeding mistakes to avoid

One of the most common errors is **overfeeding**. Too many calories can lead to excessive weight gain, unwanted excitability, or reduced efficiency. A horse that is already maintaining well on forage may not need large amounts of additional hard feed. In contrast, **underfeeding** can leave a horse lacking energy, affecting **stamina**, recovery, and overall **performance**.

Another serious mistake is making **sudden diet changes**. The digestive system needs time to adapt, especially when switching between feed types or increasing intake. Abrupt changes can disrupt **gut health** and increase the risk of **colic**. Any new feed should be introduced gradually, with close attention to manure consistency, appetite, and behaviour.

It is also easy to focus only on energy and forget the rest of the ration. A horse can receive enough calories but still fall short on protein, minerals, or vitamins. Equally, adding more feed without assessing forage first can create imbalance rather than improvement. Good feeding is about the whole diet, not one ingredient or one bag of feed.

Supplements and when they may help

Supplements are most useful when they address a clear need. Many working horses benefit from extra **vitamins** and **minerals** if the base diet is not fully covering requirements, particularly when forage quality varies. A **ration balancer** can sometimes be a better option than multiple separate products because it helps fill nutritional gaps while keeping the overall diet simple.

Electrolytes are often helpful for horses that sweat regularly, especially in more intense work or warm conditions. They support **electrolyte balance** and can assist recovery after exercise. If a horse loses a lot of fluid through **sweating**, replenishing those losses becomes part of maintaining consistency in work.

Joint support products may also be considered for horses in regular or demanding work, especially if there are signs of stiffness or increased wear and tear. However, supplements should never be used to mask a poor ration. They work best when the basic feed, forage, and water plan is already well set up.

Feeding a horse in different seasons

Seasonal changes affect appetite, workload, water consumption, and body condition. In **winter feeding**, horses often need more energy to maintain body temperature, particularly if weather is **overweight horse feed** cold and turnout is limited. They may also need more forage to support steady energy release and help maintain **coat condition** and bodyweight.

In **summer feeding**, horses may face higher levels of **sweating**, more insect-related stress, and changes in exercise patterns. That can increase the need for **water intake** and sometimes **electrolytes**. Some horses also need careful monitoring because hot weather can affect appetite, making it harder to consume enough forage and concentrate feed.

Seasonal diet changes should be gradual. A horse that maintains well on a certain ration in one season may need a different balance in another. The key is to watch the horse rather than relying on a fixed feeding routine all year round. Changes in coat, muscle tone, and appetite often provide useful clues.

How to assess whether a feed is working

The best way to judge a ration is by looking at real-world results. Start with the **body condition score** and **condition score**. Is the horse maintaining an appropriate level of cover? Has there been unwanted loss or gain? Then look at **stamina**, recovery after work, and the horse's willingness to perform.

Weight gain can be a sign the feed is supplying enough energy, but it is not the only indicator. A feed may be too rich if the horse becomes overly fresh or gains too much weight. Likewise, a feed may appear adequate on

paper but fail in practice if the horse remains flat, loses topline, or struggles to complete work comfortably.

Performance is the ultimate test, along with attitude, recovery, and consistent condition.

Good feeding is measured in outcomes: stable condition, reliable stamina, healthy digestion, and a horse that can do the job asked of it.

Keep an eye on manure, water consumption, coat shine, and behaviour under saddle or in harness. These signs, combined with regular bodyweight checks and scoring, help show whether the diet is supporting the horse properly.

What to ask a horse feed company UK

When speaking to a **horse feed company UK**, ask for clear **feed analysis**. This should help you understand energy content, protein levels, fibre sources, oil inclusion, and any added vitamins or minerals. A good company should also explain the purpose of each ingredient and how it supports different types of work.

Request the full **ingredient list**, not just marketing claims. The list can help you compare products and judge whether the feed is suitable for your horse's digestion, workload, and appetite. You should also ask about **feeding rates**, because a feed can look nutritionally strong but still be unsuitable if the recommended amount is too low or too high for your horse.

Perhaps most importantly, ask for **nutritional advice** tailored to the horse's age, workload, and current condition. A quality company should be able to discuss forage-first planning, whether the ration needs more digestible fibre or more energy density, and how to introduce the feed safely. The best advice is practical, transparent, and based on the horse's actual needs rather than a generic recommendation.

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FAQ

How much should I feed a working horse?

The amount depends on the horse's workload, bodyweight, forage intake, and current condition. Start with forage as the base, then add hard feed only as needed to meet energy requirements and maintain condition score. Adjust gradually and monitor body condition score, stamina, and performance to see whether the ration is right.

What is the best type of feed for a horse in hard work?

A horse in hard work usually benefits from a ration that combines digestible fibre, enough starch where appropriate, and added oil for extra calories without excessive bulk. The best feed is one that supports slow-release energy, muscle repair, and recovery while remaining palatable and easy to digest.

Do working horses need more starch or fibre?

That depends on the horse and the level of work. Many horses do well on a fibre-led ration with some oil, especially if they need steady energy and good gut health. Horses in heavier work may need more starch, but it should be balanced carefully to avoid upsetting digestion or increasing colic risk.

How do I know if my horse feed is suitable?

Check the feed label, feed analysis, and ingredient list, then compare those details with your horse's workload and body condition score. A suitable feed should help maintain weight, support stamina, and improve performance without causing digestive upset, excess excitability, or unwanted weight gain.

When should I add supplements to a working horse diet?

Add supplements when there is a clear reason, such as extra vitamins and minerals, electrolytes for sweating, or joint support for demanding work. They are most effective when the base diet is already well balanced and forage-first. If you are unsure, ask for nutritional advice before adding multiple products.