

Ask an Agent: Too Many Supplements!
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The six basic equine nutrient categories are simple: carbohydrates, protein, fat, vitamins, minerals, and water. Water intake is self-regulated and horses on average drink 5-15 (or more) gallons of water per day depending on temperature, humidity, and activity level. That leaves the horse owner being responsible for ensuring a balanced diet based off the other five nutrient categories through feeding hay, forages, commercial feed, and supplements. Majority of mature horses will do well on commercial feed ration that is comprised of 8-12% protein with 4-6% fat, throw in some hay or pasture time and their carbohydrates will be met. Of course it's not always that easy; we have our "easy-keepers" that get fat on air and on the opposite side of the spectrum we have the "hard-keepers" that make us cringe when we look at our feed bill. So what do we do when we feel like our feed or hay is not enough? We purchase supplements!

Supplements are the key to everything right? Horse's hooves are starting to crack a little; hoof supplement! Horse just turned 20; joint supplement! Angry mare; calming supplement! It does seem like all these supplements have a little magic in them, but can you over do it? The simple answer is...YES! Over-supplementing is costly, and in some cases can be toxic. A quick search on supplements on SmartPak resulted in 427 products!

With so many products, it can be difficult to decide on which product you should purchase. In order to understand what nutrients are missing, if any, you need to know what you are currently feeding and what your horse's needs are based on weight, age, physiological condition (pregnant or lactating) and activity level. All commercial feeds are required to have a tag that lists ingredients and minimum percentages of nutrients including vitamins and minerals. To get the best nutritional snap shot you should also have a forage analysis of your hay that lists vitamins and minerals to best understand where your horse could be lacking. Blood analysis can be utilized, but I would only recommend that if your horse is really struggling due to cost and variability of results. Hair analysis is not a reliable source to evaluate the horse's nutritional status due to extreme variability of results.

Once you have determined a nutritional base line of where your horse is; now you can determine what supplements are needed to round out your horse's diet. When supplement shopping be sure that you always read label ingredients and percentages. Most websites have a "compare" button that will allow you to easily compare similar products to determine what will suit your horse's needs. Be cautious on going for the single ingredient supplements, as frequently your horse will not need that much of a specific nutrient. Always follow label directions and recommendations and as always be sure to make diet changes slowly as to not upset your horse's digestion.

Overall, adding supplements to your horse's diet can bring nutrients that they are lacking in feed and forages. However, be cautious with over supplementing as that can become expensive and lead to overconsumption resulting in toxicity. For more help in balancing your horse's diet you can consult with your feed company's equine nutritionist or your veterinarian.