

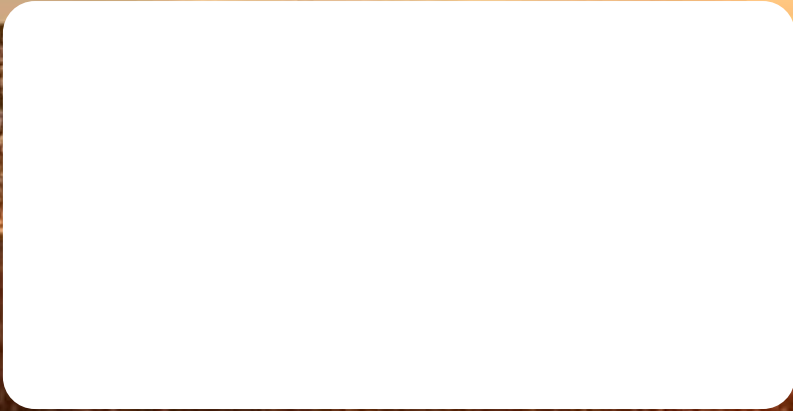
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AGRONOMY & EQUINE EDITOR
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1929



SINCE

PREPARING YOUR HORSE FOR SPRING

ARE YOU AND YOUR HORSE READY FOR SPRING? CHECK OFF ALL THE ITEMS ON THIS LIST TO PREPARE FOR A HEALTHY, SUCCESSFUL RIDING SEASON.

Springtime—a season we look forward to as equestrians. Riding arenas emerge from their snowy blankets. The sun shines longer and brighter every day. Much-awaited shows and competitions are right around the corner, and we're eager to shift things into the next gear.

Full of potential, the spring months set the tone for the rest of the year. The key with transitioning from winter to spring is to have a plan in place to tackle your horse's various seasonal needs. You should think about vaccinating and deworming, of course, but also about rebuilding your equine athlete's fitness after a winter hiatus.

There's a lot to accomplish transitioning into spring, so let's get organized with a checklist:

- Physical exam;
- Bloodwork (if recommended by your veterinarian);
- Dental exam;
- Fecal egg count;
- Deworming;
- Spring vaccines—core and risk-based;
- Body clipping (if applicable);
- Sheath cleaning;
- Blanket and tack maintenance/repair;
- Saddle fit evaluation;
- Diet evaluation;
- Spring cleaning and sanitizing;
- Coggins test; and
- Health certificate (aka certificate of veterinary inspection, or CVI) if your horse travels.

THE ESSENTIALS

Physical and Dental Exam

"Springtime is a great time to get your equine partner all checked out and ready to roll for the summer," says Sarah Cohen, DVM, owner of Equity Performance Equine, an ambulatory veterinary practice based in Wellington, Florida. "During a routine annual physical exam, your veterinarian can look for any unnoticed issues in your horse's heart, eyes, feet, or gastrointestinal tract. This is also an excellent time to perform an oral exam to assess the need for teeth floating as well as identify any fractured teeth or other oral health issues."

Vaccines

Spring vaccines are a routine part of wellness exams. All horses in the United States should receive the four core vaccines—rabies, tetanus, West Nile virus (WNV), and Eastern/Western equine encephalomyelitis (EEE/WEE)—and then get boosted annually. These boosters are generally given in the spring to maximize protection against WNV/EEE/WEE when mosquitoes, which spread these diseases, emerge in early summer.

Beyond these four, different geographical areas present different equine infectious disease challenges and, therefore, require different immunization protocols. "Veterinary practitioners in your specific areas will know best how to advise you regarding risk-based vaccines and guide you with respect to the needed frequency of vaccination," Cohen says.

Regions with year-round hot and humid climates have the added challenge of persisting mosquito populations, warranting biannual vaccination against WNV and EEE/WEE.

In addition to geographic risks, you must consider farm-specific risks. Facilities housing broodmares or frequently traveling show horses, for example, need to provide their horses additional protection (immunization) against influenza and equine herpesvirus (EHV).

Parting words from Cohen about vaccines: "They are safe and inexpensive. Treating a vaccine-preventable disease is both costly and heartbreaking."

Parasite control

Internal parasites can damage your horse's internal organs, especially those of the digestive tract. Equine parasitic burdens vary based on the age of the individual, geographical region, and herd immunity, says Constance Gorman, DVM—hence the importance of consulting your veterinarian when formulating a parasite control plan. Gorman is a field care associate at Hagyard Equine Medical Institute, in Lexington, Kentucky, and an FEI treating veterinarian.

The first step in parasite prevention is performing a fecal egg count (FEC) in the spring and fall to see what types of parasites might be living inside your horse, our sources say. When possible, Gorman does an FEC before deworming and again two weeks later to measure the dewormer's efficacy, a process known as a fecal egg count reduction test.

Identifying and quantifying your horse's internal parasitic load—rather than deworming willy-nilly—is key to slowing the dewormer resistance problem caused by indiscriminate administration of anthelmintics over several decades. "Individual FEC also allows more informed and more targeted deworming, thus increasing the effectiveness of each treatment," says Cohen.

The FEC is not foolproof, however. "Tapeworm eggs can be difficult to find, so I recommend deworming every horse at least annually with praziquantel regardless of FEC results," says Gorman.



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SPRINGTIME CHALLENGES

Skin issues

April showers bring May pastern sores. When snow melts into mud, many horse owners find themselves dealing with scruffy skin. Damp conditions and long haircoats can leave skin, especially on the legs, at the mercy of trapped bacteria and fungi.

Dermatophilosis (aka rain rot) is a common diagnosis. When caught early, you can usually resolve this skin infection with a couple of thorough scrubby baths, says Cohen, mixing a small amount of dilute povidone-iodine with the shampoo. "In some rare cases of severe dermatophilosis, antibiotics may be prescribed to combat the infection," she adds.

"With dermatophilosis and similar conditions, daily nursing care is often necessary," says Cohen. "Otherwise, recurrent skin issues can result in painful sores or even lameness."

She and Gorman share tips for protecting your horse's legs from mud and the skin issues it can cause:

- Keep the hair around the pastern clean and dry by brushing or toweling off dirt.
- Dry and groom your horse after heavy rain to reduce bacteria and fungus buildup on the skin.
- Apply ointments only if recommended by your vet, as gooey substances can trap bacteria near the skin.
- Pick your horse's feet daily to remove rocks packed in with the mud and to check for and manage signs of thrush.

Hoof issues

"Thrush is caused and exacerbated by damp environments common during the spring season and sometimes also by poor hoof hygiene," Cohen says. "If meticulous hoof care and over-the-counter treatments don't work or if your horse is footsore or lame, it's time to call your veterinarian."

"Additionally, during the spring season hoof growth increases, so farrier upkeep is more important than ever," Gorman says. "If the hoof has had a chance to overgrow and there are some cracks or separation along the white line area, this gives bacteria a chance to invade the foot and cause painful hoof abscesses."

Spring grass and diet

With lush spring grass, keep two things in mind: disease prevention and grazing in moderation. Spring is a precarious time for equids prone to obesity, metabolic dysregulation, and the hoof disease laminitis.

As your veterinarian will tell you, limiting metabolically challenged horses' nonstructural carbohydrate (NSC) intake is essential. Grass consumption can aggravate conditions such as insulin dysregulation, equine metabolic syndrome, and pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (PPID, formerly equine Cushing's disease). That's mainly because fresh grass contains large amounts of the NSCs starch and sugar.

"Grasses, which are naturally high in sugar, generally have an even higher sugar content in the spring and fall," Cohen says. "And the sugar content in grass actually increases through the day, so the safest time to graze at-risk animals is in the early morning hours."

Unfortunately, with certain horses, being selective about timing isn't enough. "For at-risk individuals, it's safest to stay off the grass entirely," Cohen says. If that's not an option, she recommends using a grazing muzzle when putting vulnerable equids on pasture. Research shows that properly fitted grazing muzzles reduce grass intake by 78-83% (Longland et al., 2012), making them safe and effective grazing moderation tools. You can also feed hay, of course, but recognize it contains NSCs that you might need to soak away before feeding.

Prioritize prevention, and don't wait for the arrival of spring grass to take the steps necessary to keep your horse safe. Starting in late winter, Cohen recommends asking your veterinarian to pull blood and check on your horse's metabolic status. The goal is to determine if you need to adjust medication, diet, and/or management tactics.

On the topic of nutrition, spring is a good time to consider whether your horse's diet is still meeting his needs. If his workload has fluctuated over the past few months and/or if his weight or energy levels have changed, take a fresh look at what goes in his feed bucket. "Steady increase in proper caloric intake may be necessary as your horse begins to work in higher intensity during the spring," Gorman says. Your veterinarian or nutritionist can advise you when reevaluating feeding plans for horses in your barn.

Haircoat and body clipping

With both ambient temperatures and riding time on the rise during spring, we sometimes find ourselves sliding off sweat-soaked mounts that take hours to dry. Shaving away that bothersome winter coat is an appealing solution, albeit a controversial one.

"Many factors will affect whether body clipping is the best thing for you and your horse," Gorman says. "Location and weather—especially humidity—breed of horse, discipline, and level of work are all important elements to consider."

If a horse is in an intense training program, she says she has no qualms about body clipping if the owner is aware of the precautions they must take during inclement weather. "I would not, however, body clip past February or March because that could affect your horse's summer coat that is coming in as he sheds," Gorman says. "That's of course excluding horses with PPID, for which clipping year-round may be necessary to maintain comfort." The main point is the choice to body clip will depend on individual circumstances affecting you and your horse.

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BRINGING YOUR HORSE BACK INTO WORK

With bitter weather and limited daylight during winter, many of us opt to take a break from riding. If you're one of those riders, you certainly know bringing horses back into work from a period of rest requires preparation and patience.

Gorman walks us through her protocol: "If an equine athlete is starting back from several months off, I do recommend having your veterinarian perform a basic flexion exam. Ensuring that tendons, ligaments, and joints haven't sustained any damage before starting work again will set you up for a successful comeback."

She and other experts agree that taking things slowly when working back up to previous athletic ability is a must. "Walk and trot large circles," she says. "Ride up hills. Do five to 10 minutes of supple walking and bending between trot intervals. Ride in shorter trot/canter intervals for the first few weeks as your horse is regaining both cardiovascular and musculoskeletal fitness. And don't forget to give him breaks. Recovery is just as important for muscle conditioning as is the actual work."

As fitness increases, so does muscle mass. Bulkier muscles could translate to altered saddle fit, so reach out to a professional saddle fitter if your horse shows signs of discomfort through his back as you return him to fitness.

FINAL STEP: SPRING CLEANING

Now that you've checked all the horse care items off your list, it's time to prepare your horse's living environment for the new season ahead.

As warmer weather rolls around, take the time to perform a deep spring cleaning of your barn and equipment. Run blankets through the washer, soak your grooming brushes in disinfectant, and scrub that muck off the stall walls. Whether we're talking about thrush or EHV, good hygiene is a key part of disease prevention.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

Your horse has individual needs. To keep him protected and healthy, you must provide him with the right care at the appropriate times. Full of changes and challenges, spring is an important season to stick to the preventive health care plan devised with your veterinarian. By being diligent about vaccinations, deworming, diet, and other routine necessities, you can do your part to ensure your horse has a long and productive life.

The Horse

FEEDING YOUNG HORSES: GRADUATING TO A GROWN-UP DIET

CONSIDER GROWTH RATE AND NUTRIENT BALANCE WHEN DECIDING WHAT TO FEED YOUNG HORSES.

While perusing shelves of dog food at your local pet store, you'll likely see designations on bags and cans denoting specific formulations: adult, senior, small breed, large breed. This degree of nutritional precision also applies to horses. Foals, weanlings, adults, and seniors need different amounts of protein, energy, and minerals.

Mare's milk and solid food provide excellent nutrition and make feeding fairly simple before a youngster reaches weaning age. Questions arise when he's on the cusp of the next age bracket. How do you select the right diet for a young horse that is maturing into an adult?

GROWTH RATES

Karen Davison, PhD, an equine nutritionist and director of equine technical solutions for Purina Animal Nutrition, in Gray Summit, Missouri, is well-versed in the complexities of feeding horses of all ages. She shares considerations for transitioning young horses to adult feed:

"The level of nutrition, protein, vitamins, and minerals relative to calorie requirements is much higher for a growing horse than for a mature horse," she says. "As the horse ages, there is a shift from nutrition needed to develop tissue and grow, to more nutrition devoted to maintaining the body."

Based on National Research Council estimates, an average 1,000-pound horse is 64% of his mature height at 12 months, 77% at 18 months, and 86% at 24 months.

"Skeletal growth occurs only as long as the physes (growth plates) remain open; once they mature and close, long bones cannot increase in length," says Davison.

Growth plate closure occurs from the ground up—those in the lower limbs close earliest, around nine to 11 months of age; the knees and hocks around 24 months; and the shoulders and stifles usually in the third year. Variations occur due to genetics and breed, nutrition, and management.

"Breed type modifies specifics on how to feed, mostly due to differences in rate of growth and age at maturity," says Davison. "All horses continue to mature and get heavier for a couple of years following the end of growth in height."

Kathleen Crandell, PhD, is an equine nutritionist at Kentucky Equine Research, in Versailles, with a special interest in feeding growing horses for athletic development. "Research demonstrates that we can influence growth rate with the amount of energy supplied in the diet, as long as all other nutrients are supplied in adequate amounts," she says. "What we cannot change is the final mature size of an individual beyond its genetic potential."

WHEN IS IT TIME FOR A DIET CHANGE?

Once a young horse reaches 65-70% of its mature weight—usually around a year of age—growth slows and your nutritional strategies need to change. Yearlings should generally consume 50% forage (hay and pasture) and 50% concentrate or a "junior" supplement by weight. (For the purposes of this article, "concentrate" or "supplement" refer to a manufactured, balanced feed



continued from page 3

combining forage and grain, often called a complete feed. “Grain” refers to corn, oats, and/or barley.)

Horses younger than 2 might develop a hay belly when ingesting more than 50% forage, says Davison. “This isn’t necessarily body fat but indicates a youngster’s less-efficient forage digestion,” she says. “Support lean tissue development in the youngster while not overfeeding. Body condition scoring is a great management tool to monitor growth and fat deposition.” Ideally, keep your growing horse’s body condition score around 5 or 6 on the 1-9 Henneke scale.

The proper forage-to-concentrate ratio depends on your forage quality. This is where you might want to have your hay analyzed to determine its nutrient content. As growth rate slows, a horse voluntarily consumes more forage. Because a young horse typically won’t eat enough forage to meet his protein, vitamin, and mineral requirements without getting too fat, Davison recommends feeding a ration balancer, which provides concentrated levels of protein, vitamins, and minerals without too many additional calories.

By about age 2, a horse has reached nearly 90% of his mature weight and can transition from the 50% hay and 50% supplement diet to free-choice quality hay and however much supplement or ration balancer he needs to maintain an appropriate body condition score.

How a young horse develops depends to an extent on his genetics and how the owner feeds him. “A tendency toward early development needs to be supported with good nutrition,” says Davison. “A horse that is genetically programmed to slower maturity still needs good nutrition but fewer calories. An oft-made mistake is the attempt to slow growth rate below a horse’s ‘preferred’ genetic programming, with a misguided idea that the slower the growth rate, the better. However, slow growth achieved at the expense of balanced nutrition won’t prevent developmental disorders; it simply delays when musculoskeletal abnormalities appear.”

MUST-HAVES: MINERALS AND VITAMINS

Horses need a balance of specific minerals—particularly calcium and phosphorus—for bone and cartilage development. Our sources suggest ensuring horses get as much calcium as phosphorus, ideally with a calcium-to-phosphorus ratio of 1.1-1.25. In areas where horses subsist primarily on calcium-rich alfalfa-based diets, Crandell suggests supplementing at least 0.6% dietary phosphorus.

Researchers have found that calcium-to-phosphorus ratios as high as 6:1 don’t cause developmental orthopedic disease (DOD), provided the horse receives adequate amounts of both minerals.

Trying to compensate for imbalances by adding minerals has its limitations. “Adding calcium to a calcium-deficient diet likely reduces the incidence of DOD, but adding more calcium to a diet that already contains adequate calcium is not likely to prevent DOD,” Davison says.

“A growing horse that receives the minimum recommended feeding rate of commercial concentrate growth feed or amounts above recommended feeding rates of mature horse formulations shouldn’t need additional mineral supplementation—minerals are already included in those formulations,” Crandell adds. Otherwise, you can feed 1-2 pounds of a ration balancer daily to mitigate nutrient deficiencies.

FEED FAT OVER CARBS

Nutritionists consider fat to be “safer” than carbohydrates to feed young horses. This is because blood glucose levels don’t tend to rise following the ingestion of fat calories as much as they do after carbohydrate (grain) calorie consumption.

“Added dietary fat, such as vegetable oil, is a concentrated source of energy, providing 2.5-3 times the calories as similar weight of grain,” says Crandell. “However, there is a limit to how much fat can be fed—an excess of 12% of the total diet risks disruption to the intestinal microbial ecosystem. Most total diets—forage and concentrates/supplements—rarely exceed 6% fat.”

Rice bran is a popular fat source. However, Davison notes its potential issues: “While the fat and nutrients in rice bran keep a horse shiny, its high phosphorus content is problematic and could contribute to poor skeletal development due to an inverted calcium-to-phosphorus ratio.”

With that in mind, most manufacturers of commercial stabilized rice bran products add calcium to balance the calcium-to-phosphorus ratio.

If you offer dietary fat using oil rather than a concentrate feed source that contains vitamins and minerals, supplement with 100 IU of natural vitamin E per 100 mL (~3 ounces) of vegetable oil, says Crandell. “There is an upper limit to the amount of fat a horse will tolerate,” she adds. “Horses are highly sensitive to rancidity in fat, which will turn them off their feed. Possible disruptions in the digestive tract caused by excess dietary fat also can contribute to poor performance.”

Crandell says fat should not replace all calories from starch; otherwise, growth and maturation could slow. On the other hand, if oversupplied, especially when necessary nutrients are missing, fat calories accelerate fat deposition.

“A young horse that reaches a body condition score of 7 or greater is at a much greater risk for developing DOD and insulin insensitivity, regardless of the source of dietary calories,” says Davison.

PREVENTING DOD

Dietary imbalances, management, and genetics make growing horses prone to DODs, which include physitis, angular limb and flexural deformities, osteochondrosis, and vertebral malformations.

continued on page 5

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Davison says that when a population of young horses has been fed a poorly balanced diet or excessive calories, or if they've been overfed after a period of improper feeding, subsequent accelerated growth rates can lead to a higher-than-normal incidence of DOD. "Significant time in confinement is also deleterious to the growing skeleton," she says. "Correcting these issues likely reduces the incidence of DOD in young horses." That said, she points out that DOD can still show up in youngsters despite excellent management and diet.

"Cutting back on protein, vitamins, and minerals slows growth rate without interrupting growth," she continues.

"Deficiencies in important nutrients potentially lead to delayed onset of DOD. Steady and proper growth can be optimized by controlling calories, providing properly balanced nutrition and adequate free-choice exercise."

"Excess weight on bones and joints of a growing horse is more detrimental than being underweight," says Crandell. "Use of a ration balancer provides a low-calorie option to balance out the forage for the easy keeper."

A low-starch, high-fat concentrate with a ration balancer might benefit horses with specific growth or metabolic issues, says Crandell. Always offer free-choice salt, as well.

Once a horse has matured, he is not likely to incur a new "developmental" orthopedic disease. "However," says Davison, "unsoundness caused by DOD may not become apparent until skeletal structures are stressed by concussion or repetitive work, as when a young horse enters into training or competition."

PREVENTING GASTRIC ULCER SYNDROME

The equine gastrointestinal tract evolved to handle small frequent meals throughout the day. Equine gastric ulcer syndrome (EGUS) can result when any age horse consumes abundant carbohydrates (grain products) and/or is subject to long periods of fasting between meals. Providing steady access to forage is an important strategy for lowering a horse's risk of developing EGUS.

"Feeding free-choice hay to any age horse is appropriate when they're working hard enough to burn calories and don't exceed body condition scores of 5-6," says Davison.

Crandell refers to a 2011 study of young Standardbreds to illustrate the importance of forage type in the growing horse's diet: "Youngsters that had been on a pasture-only diet at the start of the study were tested on two diets high in concentrate—the ulcer scores worsened. The first diet was 50% hay cubes and 50% commercial grain concentrate. The second diet used the same ingredients but ground into a complete pelleted feed. Ulcer scores were highest with the complete pelleted feed, even though it had the exact same ingredients as the cube and concentrate diet." She says this is probably due to horses' decreased chewing and saliva production when consuming a complete pelleted diet, as well as the interval without feed because horses consume pellets quickly.

TACKLING THE TRANSITION

Understanding gastrointestinal function and offering the proper balance of nutrients are key to transitioning a young horse to an adult diet. Davison says the transition might not come through feeding a different ration but, rather, offering less total feed than you would to an adult horse. Or, the shift might be to a higher proportion of forage and less supplement.

"Protein provided in the transition period is a little higher than for the mature horse because of ongoing development and building of body tissues, albeit at a slower rate," says Crandell.

Davison says there's no hard rule about what percentage-protein feeds horses need. "This is often affected by the calorie content or recommended feeding rates of supplements," she says, to meet his total protein requirements.

In general, growing horses 1 to 2 years old need about 10-15% more protein than do mature horses. "Usually protein requirements for the transitioning period are addressed by good-quality hay with a 12% protein concentrate given at the recommended feeding rate," says Crandell.

"If a horse matures early in size, weight, and substance, then transitioning to an adult feed may be done with little to no transition time, but if the horse still seems immature with growing yet to do, then staying a little longer with growth feed is advantageous," she adds.

Also consider nutrient quality when modifying diet: An "adult" diet of a supplement of 10% protein with 8-10% protein in grass hay is not sufficient for a growing youngster. Davison doesn't recommend transitioning youngsters to adult diets until all growth and development is complete.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

Dietary decisions aren't necessarily about good or bad feeds, calorie sources, or ingredients, says Davison. Rather, they're based on the total diet's balance. Proper feeding management and nutrition should support growth without overfeeding and fattening the young horse.

"Successful transitioning depends on the individual horse and its rate of maturation," says Crandell. "Transitioning a horse is more an art than a science. As the old saying goes, 'It is the eye of the master that fattens the calf.'" Provide appropriate amounts of correctly balanced, lower-starch rations.

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