



Feeding the Miniature Horse

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Assessing body condition score

Evaluating your miniature horse's body condition is necessary before you can determine how much hay and grain he needs. Is he too fat, too skinny or pretty close to proper weight? A horse should have a moderate body condition score of 5 to 6, which means the back is level, the ribs can't be seen but can easily be felt, and there are no obvious fat deposits on the crest (top) of the neck, around the withers and at the base of the tail. If a horse has a heavy hair coat, it is important to feel underneath the hair, especially in the winter, to get an accurate assessment of his weight. If you can easily feel ribs beneath the hair, more energy in the diet is required. (For more information on body condition scoring, please visit www.extension.org/horse.)

Hay or forage

Hay or forage is the most important ingredient in a horse's diet. Every horse needs at least 1 percent of its body weight or 50 percent of total intake in good quality forage. Use a weight tape to estimate your horse's weight or weigh the animal on a livestock scale. Buy enough

bales of green, alfalfa-grass mixed hay or good quality grass hay to last the season. Second-cutting hay typically provides an optimum level of nutrients for horses, but quality is very dependent on when and how the hay is harvested. An average miniature horse weighs 200 pounds and should receive at least 2 to 4 pounds of forage a day. Look for a fine, soft, leafy hay rather than a coarse, mature hay. Feed at least one-third to one-half of a flake of a good quality grass or alfalfa-grass mixed hay twice a day. Flakes of hay can vary greatly by thickness; a normal flake should be 1½ to 2 inches thick. When dividing the flake of hay, put it over the horse's feed pan so that any chaff will fall into the feed pan. This chaff is high in protein and is desirable in the feeding program. Finally, when feeding miniature horses, avoid placing the feed directly on the ground — excessive intake of sand or dirt may cause colic.

If your miniature horse has access to pasture and is overweight, make sure he/she wears a grazing muzzle to decrease the chance of overeating grass. Also, most

horses, including miniatures, should have limited access to early spring pastures to avoid laminitis.

Grain

Good quality forage is the mainstay of a horse's diet, but horses may also need a grain mix (concentrate) to supplement their energy requirements as well as help balance for other nutrients such as protein, vitamins and minerals. When selecting a concentrate, make sure it is designed for your horse's age, workload and production status. An adult horse needs no more than 12 percent protein in the total diet (forage and grain); weanlings and yearlings will benefit from 12 to 14 percent protein. It is easy to overfeed grain to any horse but especially a miniature horse. Excessive grain feeding or too much grain per feeding may increase the likelihood of colic due to gas fermentation or carbohydrate overload. If grain is needed, it should be fed in small amounts during several feedings daily. Grain should be fed by weight, not volume, so weigh your grain on a scale and know how much grain you are feeding. One pound of grain divided into two feedings would be enough for your average miniature horse, although some may need

slightly more on the basis of their body condition score. If your horse tends to get fat, try a supplement that is designed to balance nutrients for the forage you are feeding, and one that can be fed in very small amounts.

Water

Miniature horses also need access to clean, fresh water daily. Water should range in temperature from 45 to 65 degrees F — neither very hot nor very cold water is desirable. At least 5 gallons of fresh water should be offered daily. Consumption may increase or decrease with weather conditions and reproductive status.

Supplemental fat

Flax seed is a great supplement to put a shine in your horse's coat. Buy a package of ground flax seed at the health food store and feed 1 level teaspoon mixed into the grain at one of the feedings every day. Do not give any other type of oil, such as corn oil, while giving flax seed. Some feeds include flax seed oil. Always read the label to find out what you are truly feeding your horse. Corn oil may be used in place of flax seed. Feed any supplemental fat with caution, and cut back on grain when feeding to prevent the horse from becoming overweight and more prone to laminitis.

Trace mineral salt

Providing a trace mineral salt block will encourage your horse to drink and will replace electrolytes lost through sweating. Trace mineral salt will also provide the macro- and microminerals required to keep your horse healthy.



Dental health

Regardless of what or how you feed your miniature horse, attention to dental health is critical. Dental problems are fairly common in miniatures because their teeth are very large for their small jaws — nearly the same size as a full-sized horse's teeth! Like larger horses, miniature horses should have their teeth examined by a veterinarian or equine dentist at least once a year. This should be done even more frequently in horses that are under 5 years of age or over 12 years when teeth change rapidly. Horses may develop sharp points on their teeth, abscesses or other problems that will make it difficult to properly grind their feed, and that may lead to colic. Head tossing, bit discomfort, weight loss, and “quidding” or dropping feed out of the mouth while eating are all signs that a horse's teeth should be examined.

Parasite control

To keep them in good health, miniature horses will also require regular deworming with parasite control products available at your local feed or tack store. When a horse is carrying a large parasite load, it may appear “unthrifty” with a rough hair coat, a potbelly and

visible ribs. Deworm your horse every 6 to 8 weeks using an appropriate rotation program as suggested by your equine veterinarian. It is also a good idea to have your veterinarian do a fecal flotation test yearly about 2 weeks after deworming to be sure your deworming program is working effectively, and to stay up-to-date with AAEP recommendations on parasite control.

Things to remember

Good nutrition is an important part of keeping your miniature horse healthy and happy.

- Be sure to feel your horse's body on a weekly basis, especially in the winter, to be sure he is not getting too fat or too thin.
- Provide your mini with good quality, soft hay at least twice a day.
- Include a grain or pellet feed (12 percent protein for adults, 14 percent for growing horses) as necessary to help your horse maintain good body condition.
- Trace mineral salt is important all year round to give your mini the minerals he needs and keep him drinking to prevent colic.
- Check those teeth! Dental care is vitally important to the welfare of your miniature horse.
- Design a parasite control program with your vet so the feed you put in your mini benefits him, not his unwanted guests!

With these guidelines and the help of your vet, your mini can be a healthy partner and friend for many years.