

# Nutritional Priorities

## For the Weanling



By now your foal is full of energy and rambunctious, strengthening its legs, growing steadily and exploring its new world. Often breeding farms may wean foals at 4-6 months, however, this may not be the optimal time for your mare or foal, so give thought to needs of your particular situation and consider the options that may be available to you. No matter how you do this, the weaning process will cause significant stress to both mare and foal, so care should be taken to minimize this stress to support the welfare of both. This is also a time for rapid growth of the foal and the important development of the skeletal structures. Improper feeding at this time, too much or too little, can cause orthopedic disease and other growth issues. Daily turnout is an important part of the management as well. Great care needs to be given to ensure the weanling grows in a healthy steady manner for optimal health and growth for its lifetime.

- Prior to weaning, the foal should be introduced to “creep feed”, a specially designed feed for foals at this age. This is often slowly introduced around 2-3 months of age, as this correlates with the time when the milk composition is changing and containing fewer nutrients, thus it may not be meeting all the nutritional needs of a growing foal. If you are able to do milk testing, this can be helpful to determining the needs of the foal.
- Creep feeding helps to supplement the deficiencies that will occur in the mare’s milk and will help the digestive tract adjust slowly to eating concentrates after weaning. Often the foal may be trying to eat the concentrate of the mare by this time.
- The goal of feeding transition from milk to creep feed (both before and after weaning), is to achieve a healthy and steady growth period for a sound and healthy animal, as deficiencies or excesses in nutritional intake can cause growth problems that may affect the foal the rest of its life.
- Weanlings need extra energy and protein that cannot be supplied by a forage only diet (in most cases) that leads to optimal growth.
- Consult with your equine nutritionist to choose a quality creep feed that will meet the needs of your foal, taking into consideration factors such as growth rate, breed, etc. Then ensure that you are feeding according to the feeding instructions, usually at a rate that is up to 1% of body weight, in small meals.
- The creep feed should supply the nutrients not found in adequate amounts in the forage, generally the priorities are energy, protein and minerals necessary for growth. Protein levels are generally about 14-16% crude protein, but the quality of protein is also important and your equine nutritionist can help ensure it has the right profile of amino acids such as lysine and other essential amino acids specifically needed for a foal at this age.

# Nutritional Priorities

## For the Weanling



- A specifically designed ration balancer of vitamins and minerals may also be needed depending on the nutritional quality of the forage, hence the value of analyzing the forage.
- It may be tempting to feed rich forage (i.e., legume pasture/hay of alfalfa or clover) to the foal, but care must be taken to ensure overall balance of the diet. A diet too rich can cause problems, just as much as a deficient diet. The rapidly growing foal may need to have higher mineral intake to support the growth but the “easy keeper” foal may need to have the energy levels decreased in the feed. Forced rapid growth or delayed growth can both cause issues as the skeleton is growing so daily monitoring and regular consultation with your equine nutritionist and/or veterinarian will be helpful.
- Regular observation of body condition score and growth will help you increase or decrease the feed as needed as the foal gets older and winter is coming with cold weather or decreased quality of the pasture in the fall. The weanling should be maintained at a BCS of 5. Ensure that you are scoring all 6 areas when looking at a foal and do not judge it simply on “ribs”.
- Fresh, clean water should be provided at all times for the foal, as well as salt in loose form, or at least a salt block.
- Consult with your veterinarian to set up a regular program for any vaccination or deworming needs that may be necessary for your area and for given disease concerns. Observe the way the foal is eating to rule out any dental issues as the teeth begin to grow in.
- If there are any signs of lameness, illness, listlessness, diarrhea, signs of colic or others, this needs to be referred to your veterinarian, as health conditions in the foal can rapidly get worse.
- The goal is to feed for healthy, optimal growth of the foal according to its own genetics. Forcing fast growth on the foal, for economic reasons of the yearling sales, can significantly increase the risk of orthopedic disease. This in turn, increases the risk that this horse will have lameness issues in its life and possibly become an unwanted horse as its “utility” is decreased in the eyes of potential owners.

For more information sign up for Equine Guelph’s 12 week online course on Management of the Mare, Stallion and Foal. Check the Education pages of Equine Guelph for more information.