

Horse Care Info Sheet

Ration Balancer Info Sheet

When might a ration balancer be a good choice?

- Horse is receiving a forage only diet, such as hay or pasture:** This is especially true for “easy keepers”, horses on weight loss diets that are receiving restricted amounts of mature hay, and horses on pasture that is near the end of the growing season.
- Horse is receiving cereal grains (like oats or barley) or other feeds (like beet pulp) instead of commercial feeds:** Cereal grains and feeds like beet pulp contain variable amounts of protein, vitamins and minerals. The feed may not be providing enough of a certain nutrient and/or these nutrients may not be in the correct ratio for a horse.
- Horse is receiving less than the recommended amount of a commercial feed:** Commercial feeds are formulated to provide the recommended amounts of vitamins and minerals that the horse needs if you follow the correct feeding recommendations that describe the horse on the bag. If you feed less than the recommended amount, then the horse will likely not receive recommended amounts of these essential nutrients. Adding a ration balancer can account for these deficiencies. Talk to the company's feed rep or nutritionist to be sure that you are feeding the products in an appropriate ratio.
- In other situations:** There is no one size fits all approach to horse nutrition. A ration balancer may be an ideal choice in more situations than we can possibly list here. Talk to your veterinarian, equine nutritionist, or feed representative to learn more about these products!



What is a Ration Balancer?

Ration balancers are products meant to provide protein (specifically essential amino acids), vitamins and minerals to a horse. These products generally have lower feeding rates, with guidelines for most horses set around 1-2 pounds of product per day, and do not provide as many calories as a traditional concentrate feed. They make good options for horses that need a source of essential amino acids, vitamins, and minerals, but that do not need many additional calories in their diet.

How would I find a Ration Balancer at the feed store?

- Read the information on the bag:** Companies will often include the words “ration balancer”, “forage balancer”, or “balancer” somewhere in the name of the product or in other places on the bag, such as the product’s description or feeding directions.
- Read the feeding directions:** Ration balancers will usually have feeding guidelines that suggest around 1 – 2 pounds of feed per day. The directions may also include guidelines on what type of forage that the balancer is meant for. For example, the balancer may be formulated to be fed to a horse that is receiving strictly grass hay, and so a horse that is being fed hay that contains a legume like alfalfa may be better off with a different balancer product.

- **Look at the amount of protein in the feed:** Ration balancers will usually range from about 12% - 32% crude protein, depending on the type of forage that they are meant to fed with.
- **Vitamins and minerals:** Ration balancers usually contain a more concentrated amount of vitamins and minerals than a typical concentrate feed. This is because they need to contain enough of these essential nutrients to meet a horse's requirements when a smaller amount of feed is being fed. You may see differences in the vitamin and mineral profile between products, which may be due to different factors, like the geographic location that the balancer is designed for and/or the forage that it has been designed to be fed with.
- **Ask for help!:** You can ask for assistance from staff at your local feed store. They may be able to point you in the direction of ration balancers from different feed companies. If you prefer to feed products from a certain company, there should be contact information for the company somewhere on their website or feed bag. They should have nutritionists on staff who will be able to point you to their ration balancer(s) and provide more insight about the product. You may also wish to ask your veterinarian and/or contact an equine nutritionist to learn more about these products and which one may work best for your horse.

What might I want to know about my horse before choosing a ration balancer?

Health: It's always important to be informed about your horse's health before making feeding decisions. For example, if the horse has certain health conditions, like equine metabolic syndrome or pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction, then you may want to know more about the balancer's non-structural carbohydrate content.



BCS: It's also important to be aware of your horse's [body condition score](#) over time. If the horse is overweight, or you are concerned about weight gain, then you may want to know more about the balancer's caloric content. Conversely, if the horse is underweight, or you are concerned about weight loss, then a different type of feed product may be more appropriate.

Topline: A horse's topline can tell us a lot about their nutritional status. Topline scoring is a method, developed by Don Kapper and his team, that evaluates the muscle along the horse's topline and can help shed light on whether there are issues with the quality and/or quantity of protein in the horse's diet. You can learn more [here](#). If there are issues with your horse's topline, then it's a good indication that they may benefit from the use of a ration balancer.

Forage: It's important to know the type and quality of the forage that the horse is receiving, as this can dictate which ration balancer will be most appropriate for the horse. Note: Equine Guelph offers an [Introduction to Forage](#) short course where you can learn how to evaluate the type and quality of a forage. You can learn more about why this is important and meet the course instructor, Dr. Paul Sharpe, in this [video](#).

Content graciously provided by experienced equine nutritionist, Don Kapper.



Don Kapper is a highly experienced equine nutritionist. Don graduated from Ohio State University and achieved his credentials as a Professional Animal Scientist from the American Registry of Professional Animal Scientists in 1996 and has been a sought-after speaker for equine meetings in both the U.S. and Canada. He was a member of the "Performance Electrolyte Research" team at the University of Guelph and wrote the chapter on "Applied Nutrition" for the authoritative veterinary textbook: "Equine Internal Medicine", 2nd edition. Don also co-developed the "Equine Nutrition" course for the Equine Science Certificate program for Equine Guelph and has been a popular guest speaker in several Equine Guelph online courses, including the Equine Growth and Development, Exercise Physiology and Advanced Equine Nutrition.