

Optimising the Growth of Foals: Back to basics

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When feeding the growing foal, the goal is to achieve a steady growth rate from birth to maturity, avoiding any severe growth depression or spurt by ensuring that all nutrients are consumed in the proper amount. This can only be achieved through a delicate balance of energy, protein, and minerals:

- Growing foals have a certain energy requirement. If too much energy is provided in the ration, the risk of developmental orthopaedic disease is greatly increased. If not enough energy is provided, growth rate will be reduced.
- Growth rate is not known to be affected by more dietary protein than required, but is reduced by an inadequate protein intake.
- There are many essential nutrients in the growing foal's ration, but studies have shown that a correlation between the occurrence of developmental orthopaedic disease in horses and reduced amounts of calcium, phosphorus, copper and zinc, but not with other nutrients in weanlings' diets has been observed. The incidence of these diseases decreased significantly when these minerals, particularly copper were increased in the diet.
- To provide sufficient dietary energy and protein for rapid growth and often for maximum mature size, grain will most likely be required. A good quality protein meal containing adequate levels of lysine, such as soyabean meal may also be necessary. Otherwise, growth may be slowed.
- Fats or oils may be added to growing foal diets to improve the energy levels.
- When pasture is available and makes up a large proportion of the weanling's intake, it is good practice to test the pasture for mineral levels to prevent dietary deficiencies. In these situations, a small hand fed ration containing appropriate levels of the deficient minerals may be all that is required.
- The energy, protein, calcium, phosphorus, zinc and copper requirements of the growing foal are frequently greater than those present in commonly used cereal grains and forages and supplementation of these minerals is often required to assist in preventing skeletal problems.
- A trace-mineralised salt lick and good quality water should always be available.

The horse feed market has been saturated with a vast number of equine feeds and supplements, each varying according to their energy, protein, amino acid and vitamin and mineral levels, as well as their method of processing. Every stud farm in Australia has a unique environment and will have different levels of nutrients available from pastures. Customising rations to complement the individual farm environment will ensure the growing foal's nutrient requirements are adequately met, ensuring optimal growth and increasing the likelihood of the foal going on and meeting its potential to perform.

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