



You'd think from the plethora of balancers now on the market that they were the best thing since sliced bread – well, they are, for some horses!



Balancers

The truth behind the hype



What are they?

They are a really useful way of giving your horse all the nutrients he needs, and which are likely to be lacking in the forage element of his diet, without providing any additional calories. If you like, they provide all the essential nutrients you'd find in a "traditional" mix or cube without the energy or calorie element and, as a result, can be fed in much smaller quantities.

What do they contain?

Mainly a wide range of vitamins and minerals in carefully calculated ratios to provide a balance of these nutrients to meet a horse's daily needs. There are nationally recognised minimum levels to which all feed companies work then each will apply their own specialist knowledge, skill and research findings to tweak their own formulations. The basics should all be there though, whichever balancer you choose; nutrients to support healthy hoof growth, metabolism, tissue repair – all the body processes which are involved in keeping a horse healthy.

What makes pelleted balancers different from broad spectrum vitamin and mineral supplements is the fact that they contain quality protein which supplies essential amino acids. Amino acids are the building blocks of all body tissues, including horn, hair, muscle and bone so are pretty important and often deficient in modern forages. Most balancers also contain one or more "digestive enhancers", like a yeast culture eg Yea-Sacc®1026 or prebiotic eg Digest Plus (ScFOS), which help support gut efficiency.

Some balancers are said to contain special "supplements" to target certain issues but this is just another way of saying they contain all the nutrients necessary to support these areas. As long as the nutrients contained in a balancer are fully balanced to support all aspects of a horse's health and well-being etc, it will have a very similar specification to those whose ingredients are "dressed up" as supplements.

What do they do?

Feeding the correct amount of balancer for your horse's bodyweight and workload will ensure he is receiving all the nutrients he needs because he is getting a fully balanced diet. A fully balanced diet provides optimum nutrition to help your horse feel and be as healthy as he can and therefore to be able to perform to the best of his ability – the rest is down to you! Evidence of the effects of a fully balanced diet will be soft supple skin and a shiny coat, strong healthy hooves, great muscle tone and a top line to match the work and training you are putting in.

You won't necessarily see any weight gain because a balancer doesn't contain significant calorie levels but an overall improvement in condition will be seen if the previous diet was deficient. The yeast and prebiotics that balancers contain, and which help improve gut efficiency, should mean that your horse is able to extract more from the forage and other elements of his diet. As a result you may see a little weight gain or, if you are feeding hard feed, you may be able to cut back once your horse is looking and feeling well.

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Other benefits that you may experience from your horse receiving a fully balanced diet include an increased enthusiasm for work. Horses who are not getting enough vitamins and minerals often feel lacklustre and lazy but, once getting the nutrients they need, their metabolism improves and they feel a whole lot better! Improving gut health, through the inclusion of digestive enhancers (yeast, MOS, ScFOS), can also make a horse feel more comfortable in himself and therefore less crabby or jumpy.

When might I feed one?

If your horse or pony's current diet is in any way lacking in nutrients, adding a balancer will help address these deficiencies by providing all the horse needs for health and well-being. A horse could be missing out on essential nutrients if:

- His diet consists of forage alone
- You are feeding less than the recommended amount of hard feed, alongside forage
- You are feeding a compound feed that is formulated for horses working at lower levels than yours
- You are feeding straights, like oats and/or barley, alongside forage

Forage-only diets

It is now widely accepted that modern pasture and forage is deficient in a range of nutrients so, while your horse or pony may look ok on forage alone, he could be missing out. Feeding a balancer will give you the peace of mind that your horse is not missing out and is definitely worth doing if he or she is healing, working/competing, pregnant or growing.

Adding them to compound feeds

If you don't want to feed the full amount of a particular compound feed you can do one of two things to ensure your horse receives a fully balanced diet. Either switch to a lower energy feed which you can feed at recommended levels, without your horse gaining weight or getting frisky, or top up the reduced amount of feed with a balancer.

If you are feeding a cheaper feed brand or a lower spec feed than your horse requires for his workload, adding a balancer will bring the overall nutrient content of the diet up and help ensure your horse's requirements are met.

Adding them to straights

Straight cereals, like oats or barley, are great sources of extra carbohydrate calories but are definitely lacking in other nutrients, which a balancer is designed to provide.

Which one do I choose?

For Good-Doers/Laminitis-prone

There is now so much choice that, like with mixes and cubes, it's almost makes life more complicated instead of less. If your main aim is to provide essential nutrition without additional calories or starch, to be honest, any balancer will do! Remember not to get hung-up on starch levels; the amount of balancer you feed (typically 100g per 100kg bodyweight) is so low that, whatever the percentage starch content, the actual amount of starch your horse receives from his daily balancer is negligible.

For Performance

If your horse is working hard and/or competing then his requirements for quality protein and some other nutrients will be correspondingly higher than for a horse who is resting or in light work. You should therefore look for a balancer which is formulated to meet the needs of a performance horse and which is likely to contain higher levels of protein, for example, for muscle development and tissue repair.

For Breeding-stock

Youngsters who are growing or mares who are pregnant also have elevated nutritional requirements so specially formulated stud balancers are definitely the best option. A mare can be fed a balancer from conception onwards to ensure she is getting all she needs for her own well-being and to grow the foetus inside her. Growing youngstock need the nutrients, supplied by a balancer, to build and grow tendon, muscle, bone and other tissues. Calorie intake can affect growth rates and the beauty of feeding a balancer is that calorie levels can be regulated to maintain even growth rates whilst the balancer continues to provide essential nutrition.

For Special Problems

There are also balancers which contain additional nutrients or "nutraceuticals", for example, to support joint health. These can be useful but, if your horse has a real problem or his lifestyle is demanding on his joints, feeding a specially formulated supplement, in addition to your balancer or hard feed, will allow you to feed higher levels of a wider range of nutraceutical ingredients to, hopefully, greater benefit.

For Weight Gain

If your horse needs to gain a considerable amount of weight and condition then really, a specially formulated conditioning feed, is the most effective and cost effective option. Remember, for weight gain you need to feed more calories and, whilst bagged fibre sources, like alfalfa and sugar beet, provide more digestible fibre than forage, a calorie-dense feed provides more calories per scoop so meal sizes can remain manageable. A diet of a couple of scoops of Top Line Conditioning Cubes per day plus ad lib forage is still "high" in fibre and the digestibility of the cubes means your horse is getting the most from every mouthful to gain the condition you want.

For further information or a practical and individual diet for your horse, contact one of Baileys Nutrition team on 01371 850 247 (option 2)

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