

Selecting the appropriate horse feed in winter is less about selecting one “best” product and more about tailoring the diet to the horse’s seasonal energy needs, body condition score, workload, and access to forage. Winter conditions changes how horses use calories, how much roughage they need, and how important hydration and digestive health become. A sensible winter feeding plan starts with forage first, then adds hard feed only where it is needed for weight maintenance, performance, or extra support.

This guide details the main types of horse feed, how to evaluate feed value, how to read a simple horse feeding chart, and in what cases a complete horse feed or balancer makes sense. It also covers budget, common feeding mistakes, and practical horse feed advice uk owners can use during winter.

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Why horses need different feed in winter

Winter nutrition is not simply “more of the same.” Horses expend extra calories to maintain body heat through thermoregulation, especially when temperatures fall, wind picks up, or their coat and shelter are not enough to keep them comfortable. That means winter energy needs can rise even if work doesn't change.

The first thing to assess is the body condition score. A lean horse may shed pounds rapidly if forage intake is restricted or if the diet is short on energy density. An easy-keeping horse may not need much extra hard feed in general, but still needs sufficient roughage for intestinal health and regular energy intake.

Intake of forage is the foundation of cold-weather feeding. Hay and haylage provide fiber, which helps support healthy digestion and helps the horse stay warm through the fermentation process in the large intestine. A forage-based diet is usually the safest starting point, with hard feed added only if the horse cannot maintain condition, is in work, or needs extra protein, vitamins and minerals.

Winter also changes appetite, water intake, and feed digestibility. Horses often eat more forage when offered enough, but some cut back if the feed is inferior or tough to chew. That is why the best horse feed in winter is the one that complements forage, supports weight maintenance, and suits the individual horse’s body condition score.

Types of horse feed to consider in winter

There are numerous types of horse feed available, but in winter the most useful options tend to fall into a few distinct categories. The right choice depends on whether your horse needs more energy, extra fibre, improved digestibility, or a easy way to top up vitamins and minerals.

Complete horse feed is formulated to provide a full ration when fed at the recommended amount. It can be beneficial for horses that struggle to eat enough forage or need a practical, reliable feeding plan. A complete horse feed can also reduce the need to mix multiple buckets of different products.

Mixes and cubes are classic hard feed options. Mixes usually combine cereals, fibre sources, oil, and micronutrients, while cubes tend to be steadier and easier to measure. These can be helpful for horses needing a organised hard feed alongside forage, especially where the aim is to increase calorie intake without feeding huge volumes.

Calorie-dense feed is ideal for horses that lose condition in winter, work regularly, or need extra fuel without a major jump in bucket size. Energy-dense feeds often use oil, digestible fibre, and controlled starch levels rather than relying heavily on starch and sugar.

Other useful options include conditioning feed, which is aimed at weight gain or maintaining condition, and a balancer, which supplies vitamins and minerals with low calories. A ration balancer can be a smart choice for horses on a forage-based diet that needs nutritional fine-tuning rather than more bulk.

When comparing horse feed companies, look at fibre, protein, starch levels, sugar content, and whether the feed is appropriate for your horse's performance level. Product names matter less than the nutrition profile and how it matches the rest of the ration.

How to choose the best horse feed for your horse

Horse feed for first-time buyers can feel confusing because every bag seems to promise condition, shine, performance, or calm behaviour. The clearest way to choose is to start with horse feeding rules: check the horse, assess the forage, then bridge the gaps.

Maturity and workload are key. A young horse, veteran, broodmare, or horse in regular work may need extra support than an easy-keeping horse at rest. A horse in low work often does best on forage and a balancer. A horse in moderate or hard work may need a more energy-dense hard feed or complete horse feed to cover higher calorie demand.

Digestive health should guide the decision too. Horses are designed for frequent intake of fibre, so anything that helps maintain gut health is beneficial. That means prioritising forage, avoiding sudden feed transition, and choosing feeds with sensible starch levels. Horses prone to digestive upset may do better on fibre-based feeds, chopped forage, or a balancer rather than a cereal-heavy ration.

Ask three questions before buying:

- Does the horse need weight gain, maintenance, or performance support?
- Is the current forage enough, or is the horse losing condition?
- Will this feed improve the ration without increasing starch and sugar too much?

If the answer points to simple maintenance, a balancer and forage may be enough. If the horse is thin, working hard, or struggling to eat enough, a conditioning feed or complete horse feed may be more suitable.

Horse feeding chart: feeding amounts during winter

A horse feeding chart is a practical guide, but it should always be tweaked using bodyweight, condition score, and forage quality. A horse feed calculator uk tool can help work out daily intake, yet it should not replace close observation.

As a rule of thumb, most horses should receive roughage as the core of the ration, with hard feed added according to need. The forage ration is the most important part of winter feeding, because it supports hydration, warmth, and digestive health.

Use the following simple winter guide:

- **Small pony or easy keeper at rest:** forage-based diet, restricted hard feed, balancer if needed.
- **Typical horse in light work:** free access or generous forage, small amount of hard feed or balancer.
- **Horse in regular work or losing weight:** more forage plus conditioning feed or complete horse feed.

- **Thin horse or poor doer:** increase forage first, then add calorie-dense feed if required.

Bodyweight matters because feed should be tailored to size rather than guessed. A larger horse typically needs more forage and a larger total ration, while a smaller horse may maintain on less. If you are unsure, weigh-tape estimates and condition score checks are better than eye-balling alone.

A sensible approach is to check the horse weekly through winter. If weight is dropping, increase forage before increasing bucket feed. If the horse is holding condition, you may not need to change much at all. If the horse is getting too fat, reduce unnecessary calories while keeping forage available.

10 guidelines for feeding horses in winter

Good winter feeding is built on repeatable habits. These horse feeding rules may help you prevent common issues and keep the ration balanced during the colder months.

1. **Put forage first.** Build the diet around hay or haylage before adding hard feed.
2. **Feed small meals.** Large bucket feeds are less suitable than smaller meals offered throughout the day.
3. **Offer fresh water.** Hydration matters in winter and supports gut function.
4. **Watch body condition score.** Change the feed before the horse becomes overly thin or too fat.
5. **Increase fibre before starch.** Fibre is the safer and more natural choice for the horse.
6. **Choose digestible feeds.** Better digestibility supports better calorie use.
7. **Keep changes gradual.** Feed transition should be gradual to protect digestive health.
8. **Check forage quality.** Low-quality hay may need supplement support or a better forage source.
9. **Match feed to workload.** Performance level should guide the ration.
10. **Check weekly.** Weight, appetite, droppings, and behaviour all matter.

These rules matter especially where frost, mud, and limited turnout disrupt routine. A horse spending more time stabled may need different calorie support than one with access to grass, but in both cases forage and freshness matter most.

When a complete horse feed is the right choice

A complete horse feed is a good option when you want one product to supply a balanced ration alongside forage, particularly for horses that need simplicity or are difficult to keep in good condition. It is often useful where management time is limited or where the horse needs a dependable source of vitamins and minerals.

The advantage of a complete horse feed is that it can help build a balanced ration without lots of extra mixing. For horses on a forage-based diet, it can be a simple way to cover vitamins and minerals while adding calories and fibre in a more controlled way than cereal-heavy feeds.

That said, a complete horse feed is not automatically the answer for every horse. Some do better with forage and a ration balancer. Others need conditioning feed because they need more energy and protein. The best choice depends on body condition, workload, and how much forage the horse is already eating.

If the horse is a poor doer, older, or struggling to maintain condition through winter, a complete horse feed may be a sensible option. If the horse is an easy keeper, a lighter balancer-based ration is often enough.

Spillers horse feed options and other popular options

Spillers horse feed is one of various popular options available from horse feed companies in the UK. Many owners compare brands not just by reputation, but by how well the feed suits a horse's winter energy needs, digestive wellbeing, and body condition score.

Popular product types include conditioning feed, winter balancer options, fibre-based cubes, and complete horse feed formulations. A conditioning feed is often chosen for horses that need added weight or improved topline support. A winter balancer can work well for horses on mostly forage, especially where you want to provide vitamins and minerals without adding too many calories.

When comparing products from horse feed companies, read the nutrition label carefully. Look at protein, fibre, starch, and sugar, and think about how the feed balances the rest of the ration. A feed with lower starch may be a better choice for horses needing calm energy, while a conditioning feed may suit a horse needing more calorie density.

Brand matters less than suitability. Spillers horse feed may be well suited for one horse, while another may do better on a different mix, cube, or balancer. The best approach is to tailor the feed to the horse, not the label.

How much does horse feed cost in winter?

Horse feed cost is an important part of winter planning because many horses need additional forage, more bedding, and sometimes a different feed mix through the colder months. If you are trying to find out how much does horse feed cost, the simple answer is that it depends on the ration, the horse, and the feed value of the selected feeds.

Budgeting should start with the largest expense: forage. Hay and haylage are often the base of winter feeding, so it makes sense to compare value by nutrition as well as price per bale or bag. A cheaper product is not good value if the horse needs far more of it or still loses condition.

Feed value is best judged by what you get per day, not just the shelf price. A more expensive complete horse feed may actually be cost-effective if it reduces the number of supplements and provides a balanced ration. A balancer can also be a good value if the horse does not need many extra calories.

When budgeting, remember to include:

- Forage and roughage
- Hard feed or conditioning feed
- Supplements or balancer
- Wastage from poor storage or refusal

The cheapest plan is not always the best one. The aim is to spend where it supports condition, digestive health, and winter stability.

Simple horse feed advice for winter management

Practical horse feed advice UK owners can rely on starts with a forage first mindset. If a horse is warm, calm, and staying in condition on forage and a balancer, there may be little reason to add more. If the horse is losing weight, increase forage quality or quantity before adding more bucket feed.

Blanket use also affects the ration. A horse wearing rugs may need less calorie support than an unclipped, exposed horse, because the blanket reduces energy spent on thermoregulation. That does not mean you should feed less automatically, but it is one factor in the overall plan.

Weight monitoring should be routine through winter. Use a body condition score, weigh tape, or both. Track changes in ribs, neck crest, topline, and overall coverage. Small changes are easier to correct than major losses later on.

Proper cold-weather management is about routine: regular feeding times, fresh water, enough forage, and thoughtful adjustment when conditions change.

Frequent pitfalls to avoid when winter feeding

Winter feeding mistakes often come from trying to solve weight loss too quickly. Abrupt diet changes can upset the gut, reduce intake, and increase the risk of digestive problems. Any feed transition should be gradual.

Another common issue is overfeeding starch. Too much starch and sugar can make some horses harder to manage and may increase laminitis risk in sensitive animals. High-starch rations can also be less forgiving when the horse is not working hard enough to use the energy efficiently.

Colic risk is another concern. Horses need consistent forage, fresh water, and a steady feeding routine. Long gaps between meals, poor hydration, or abrupt changes in forage or hard feed can all contribute to problems.

Other mistakes include:

- Using bucket feed instead of forage
- Neglecting body condition score
- Offering large meals instead of small meals
- Moving feeds too quickly
- Selecting a product based only on price or label claims

Winter feeding should support gut health first, then maintain condition and workload.

How to build a winter feed plan

A good winter feed plan is simple, written down, and based on observation. Start by listing the forage available, the horse's current body condition score, and the workload. Then decide whether the horse needs only forage and a balancer, or whether it needs a harder-working ration with conditioning feed or complete horse feed.

If you want a practical horse feed mix recipe, think in terms of ingredients rather than exact brands: forage, a fibre-based base, a measured source of calories, and a balancer or supplement plan to cover vitamins and minerals. That might mean chopped fibre, [low sugar balancer for horses](#) cubes, oil, and a balancer, or a complete horse feed plus hay and fresh water. The exact mix should match the horse's needs and any digestive sensitivities.

Build the feed schedule around routine. Split the ration into small meals and keep forage available as consistently as possible. Then review the plan every one to two weeks during winter and adjust for weight changes, weather, and exercise level.

For forage analysis, check dry matter, energy, protein, and sugar if you can. It helps you determine whether the forage itself is doing most of the nutritional work or whether the horse needs more support from the bucket.

Quick quiz: what should I feed my horse?

Use this simple quiz as a decision guide rather than a strict rulebook. It can help you turn observation into a feeding decision.

- **What is the horse's body condition?** Underweight, fit, or overweight?
- **What is the work level?** Standing still, doing light work, or working at a higher level?
- **How good is the forage?** Plenty of hay or haylage, or limited roughage?
- **Does the horse need more calories or just better balance?**
- **Is digestive health stable?** Any signs of loose droppings, a lower appetite, or gut discomfort?

If the horse is in good condition, on decent forage, and not working hard, the answer is often forage plus balancer. If the horse is losing weight, the feeding decision may shift towards a conditioning feed or complete horse feed. If there are digestive concerns, a slower, fibre-led approach is usually safer.

FAQs about feeding horses in winter

What horse feed is best for horses in winter?

The best horse feed in winter is the one that supports the horse's body condition score, workload, and digestive health. For many horses, a forage-based diet with hay or haylage, plus a balancer, is enough. Horses that lose weight or work harder may need a complete horse feed or conditioning feed with controlled starch and sugar.

Do horses need more feed in winter?

Often, yes. Horses may have higher winter energy needs because they use more calories for thermoregulation. That does not always mean more hard feed, though. Many horses do better with more forage first, then a small increase in bucket feed only if needed for weight maintenance or work.

Is hay or hard feed better in cold weather?

For the majority of horses, forage is preferable than hard feed as the core winter foundation. Hay and haylage promote roughage intake, gut health, and internal warmth through digestion. Hard feed has a place when additional calories, protein, vitamins and minerals, or performance support are needed, but it should not replace forage.

How do I know if my horse is getting enough food in winter?

Check body condition score, weight trends, appetite, coat, droppings, and energy. If the horse is maintaining condition, has healthy digestive health, and is bright and content, the ration is probably about right. If the horse is losing weight, seems tucked up, or is leaving forage because it is not enough or unpalatable, the ration needs review.

Can I change my horse's feed suddenly in winter?

No. Sudden diet changes can disturb the digestive system and increase the risk of colic. A feed transition should be gradual, especially when changing forage, adding hard feed, or switching to a new balancer or conditioning feed. Make adjustments slowly and monitor intake and behaviour closely.