

Feeding the lactating mare at pasture

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Lactation is a period of significant, physiological stress. The nutrient needs of the lactating mare are greater than any other, except possibly the racehorse in peak training.

The lactating mare has increased requirements for energy, water, protein, calcium and phosphorous to produce milk. A deficiency in any of these nutrients is unlikely to affect the quality of milk produced, but will cause the mare to use up her own mineral store causing deficiencies and possible problems with rebreeding.

A typical TB lactating mare will produce 11-14kg milk per day for the first three months. This amount will decrease to about 8kg per day by 5 months. This represents approximately 450 gallons over a 150-day period! The period of lactation typically lasts about six months due to varying management factors such as time of weaning. There is a far greater requirement for nutrients during the first 3 months compared to the second, interestingly pasture quality and quantity increase as the mares requirements decrease!

Mares certainly need individual attention during this period. Overweight or "good-doers" need a different approach to feeding than underweight mares. Some mares sail through lactation with little if any loss of condition whereas others may lose a lot of weight. Mares in good condition should be supplied with best quality forage and a specifically formulated low calorie stud balancer such as Gain Opti-Gro pellets at the rate of 4-5lbs per day. Concentrate feeds should be split between a minimum of two feeds per day.

If mares lose weight during early lactation or mares were underweight at foaling, then this may have an adverse effect on the mares rebreeding pattern. The time for rebreeding may be lengthened and conception rates may be lower. Gain Stud Cubes or Mix may be fed instead as these provide more calories. The quantity of Gain Stud Cubes/Mix required will depend upon the mare's bodyweight and they may need as much as 1.5% of their bodyweight as concentrates per day. For a typical 500kg mare this equates to 7.5kg (16.5lbs) Gain Stud Cubes/Mix per day. This may be necessary until the grass comes through or where pasture quality is poor. Where fewer calories are required, 4lbs of Gain Stud Cubes/Mix can be

substituted for 1lb of the lower calorie Opti-Gro. This enables the correct balance of calories and micronutrients to be achieved. Otherwise, simply reducing the amount of Stud Cubes/Mix from the recommended amount will result in a lower intake of vital quality amino acids and micronutrients. Due to the artificial breeding season of the TB, mares will often be at month 3 to 4 of lactation before the spring grass arrives. Up to this point, mares will need top quality conserved forage in addition to concentrates. All lactating mares will drink large amounts of water and clean fresh water must be available to them at all times.

Daily nutrient requirements start to decline significantly during month 4 of lactation. Mares at this point will probably be on free-choice grazing with Opti-Gro. In month 4, mare's milk will provide less than 30% of the total energy needs of the foal, which should now be eating well on its own. Foals should be creep fed Opti-Gro at this point to prepare them for weaning. If pasture quality is poor due to adverse weather conditions or any other factor, foals may be fed Gain Foal Weaning Pellets instead of Opti-Gro as these supply the same micronutrients to support growth with additional calories.

Throughout lactation the bodyweight of both mares and foals should be monitored closely and minor adjustments made to the ration as and when required to maintain mares and foals in optimum condition, particularly as many mares will also be carrying another foal.