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Feeding a Horse on Box Rest

There are many reasons your vet may have prescribed a period of box rest for your horse and being well prepared will help to ensure as few complications as possible. Your horse's diet plays a pivotal part in their recovery as sufficient nutrition is vital for healing however, the change in routine should also be considered to ensure your horse maintains optimal gut health during periods of reduced activity.

Nutrition and Energy:

Horses can consume approximately 2-2.5% of their body weight in dry feed each day. Therefore, a 450 kg adult horse could eat up to 11 kg of food. Solid feeds are placed into three categories: forages (such as hay/haylage grass and chaff), concentrates (including grain or pelleted rations), and supplements (such as prepared vitamin or mineral pellets).

A horse on box rest will need a consistent flow of fibre, mainly from dry fibre (the forages as above) however some soaked fibre feeds are very beneficial. Due to the decreased mobility of a horse on box rest the stimulation of gut motility can be decreased. Increased moisture is beneficial to keep the gastrointestinal contents lubricated and easy to pass. (There is more on this in the sections below.) Good examples of such feeds are; Speedibeet, Fibrebeet, FastFibre, FibreMash, or soaked High Fibre Cubes. Soaking haynets before giving them is also a good way to increase moisture content, however not all horses will eat soaked hay and so haylage is a good alternative. The increased sugar content must be taken into consideration when choosing other concentrate feeds.

Trickle feeding a box rest horse can be a challenge. A sole haynet or feed point (e.g. haybar) may be insufficient as the horse may consume all the forage and then stand without feeding for prolonged periods of time. This is not ideal as a horse is designed to graze throughout the day. Solutions to combat this would be separating the forage into stations in different areas around the stable, hanging a net from the centre of the stable so there is no wall to push it against. Getting small holed haynets/double/triple netting haynets (these can also be tied inside haybars etc) will increase the time spent grazing and therefore increase saliva production and gut motility stimulation.

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Although the horse requires a balanced diet for correct and effective healing, it is very much quantity over quality. The content of protein, starch and sugars are very important considerations. As discussed above, fibre is the mainstay of an equids diet, however this also comes with an increased risk of high starch and sugar. These increase energy levels and calorie intake, resulting in a fizzy horse on box rest, or a fat horse, neither of which are ideal. Therefore the low calorie balancers such as Bailey's Lo cal (No 24), TopSpec Lite Balancer, MolliChop Lite or Happy Hoof Molasses Free (both combined Chaff and balancer diet) etc are all good choices, or alternatively use a calorie free chaff such as Bailey's Lite Chaff, TopChop Lite, Hifi Lite and add a powdered balancer to it. Combining this with the sugar free, low starch soaked fibre options as listed above is a great, balanced and simplistic diet for a horse on box rest.

Feeds such as conditioning cubes or mashes, mixes, straights (such as Barley or Oats), or oils are all surplus to requirement on box rest and will just result in a horse with too much energy or calorific intake. This increases the risk of colic, laminitis and even stress induced behaviours such as box walking.

Good quality hay/haylage with a balancer and some soaked fibre is the best staple diet for every horse on box rest. The specific type will be determined by the individual.

Water intake is a really important factor to consider when caring for a horse on box rest. The average horse will consume between 19 and 32L per day. Horses who receive regular turn out will consume a large quantity of water through the water content in grass. A horse on box rest that has a main proportion of its diet made up from either hay or haylage will need to consume larger quantities of water either through drinking or soaked feeds. Sometimes providing warmed water in cold weather or adding a mint or apple flavoring can encourage drinking.

Colic:

Horses have a vast gastrointestinal system and it is prone to complications especially when they encounter a sudden change in routine. Movement and exercise combined with regular field turnout aid in your horse's gut motility, when a horse is placed on box rest the risk of an impaction forming is increased. An impaction is the equine equivalent to constipation and will cause abdominal pain/colic. This occurs when reduced gut motility results in food drying out in the gut and becoming stuck. There are numerous ways you can help to prevent your horse developing an impaction whilst on box rest. Most importantly, your horse's droppings should be monitored closely. If you notice they have become dry or there are fewer than usual your feeding regime needs to be changed accordingly to increase their water consumption.

Wet feeds: Soaking hay will reduce the sugar content and increase the water content. Ideally hay should be soaked for 12 hours to achieve maximum release of sugars however it reduces the palatability and it may be more achievable to soak for a minimum of 2hrs. If your horse is still receiving a concentrate feed simply adding water to it will help keep your horse hydrated. Additionally adding warm water to a feed can increase palatability if your horse has become inappetant. Using a soaked feed such as high fibre mashes or speedi-beet also increase water consumption

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Regular feeding: Allowing your horse to have a constant supply of food will allow feed to be continuously moving through the gut preventing it becoming static. As mentioned previously there are many ways to encourage a horse to trickle feed throughout the day.

Respiratory health: When your horse is restricted to the stable, they will not be getting as much fresh air as usual and this can affect their respiratory health.

Feeding from the floor is a good way to encourage mucous and other secretions to drain and prevent them accumulating in your horse's lungs and windpipe.

Dampening feeds such as hay and haylage will reduce the dust that can irritate your horse's airways.

Menthol licks can be purchased to aid your horses respiratory health however these can sometimes contain large amounts of sugars so should be used in moderation.

Equine Gastric Ulceration:

Horses are trickle feeders and accustomed to consuming large quantities of forage continuously throughout the day and night. The stress of being restricted to a stable combined with the change in routine can make your horse more prone to developing gastric ulceration. By providing small amounts of food regularly, you can ensure your horse never goes for long periods without food in the stomach to provide protection from acid. Placing your horses forage into numerous stations around the stable and using different devices to slow the consumption of forage are useful. A gastric protection supplement can also be added to your horse's diet as a preventative measure.

Boredom:

A common consequence of box rest is boredom. Implementing trickle feeding will also provide mental stimulation for your horse as they forage around for food. The use of licks and food or non-food treats is encouraged to mentally stimulate your horse and can provide hours of entertainment. Commercial licks and boredom breakers can be purchased in tack shops but are generally high in molasses and therefore sugar. Your horse's sugar consumption should be kept to a minimum during box rest so using these licks as an occasional treat is recommended. Fresh fruit and vegetables such as turnips, swede, apples and carrots are a suitable alternative that can be securely hung on string. Researching online can provide many more ideas for preventing boredom in your horse. Mineral licks that provide your horse with a balanced selection of vitamins and minerals are beneficial.

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Calmers:

Calmers can be a useful additive to feeding a horse on box rest. Most are magnesium based and can work effectively (to a varying degree) on most horses. More advanced calmers also contain L-Tryptophan, combination of vitamins (normally B or E) and/or Thiamine Hydrochloride.

Horses in normal work are generally introduced with a loading dose then a maintenance dose. However in circumstances of increased stress such as box rest it is often beneficial to keep them on the loading dose for a longer period of time OR for the full period of box rest.

If calmer doesn't work then ACP may be another option but this is often used for horses who are severely distressed on box rest or don't respond to calmers.

There are further options for more intense sedation on box rest but these would need to be discussed with your vet in more detail.

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