

# FEEDING WEANLINGS



## HEALTH

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The weaning process can be one of the most stressful events of a young horse's life. Providing young horses with a nutritious, balanced diet before, during and after weaning is key to ensuring weanlings thrive.

As autumn unfolds in Australia, horse owners who welcomed newborn foals in the spring will either be preparing to wean their youngstock or are in the throes of doing so!

The weaning process can be one of the most stressful events of a young horse's life, sometimes resulting in a decreased growth rate and decline in condition. Providing young horses with a nutritious, balanced diet before, during and after weaning is a key factor in ensuring weanlings thrive, rather than simply survive, at this important stage of life.

*“Feeding young horses is a balancing act.”*

Feeding young horses is a balancing act, requiring careful consideration, observation and understanding of nutrition, genetics and the environment in which the animal is raised. It can often seem as though a foal morphs into a horse in the blink of an eye – indeed, in its first two years of life a horse can grow to 90% of its adult size and gain around 1.5kg per day. Ensuring that this growth occurs at a consistent, steady rate will help to minimise the risk of developmental disease and increase the likelihood of the horse reaching its genetic potential.

## FROM BIRTH TO WEANING AGE

For the first two months of a foal's life, the milk produced by its healthy lactating mother provides sufficient nutrients for growth and development at an appropriate rate. However, from as early as one week of age, some foals will sample pasture, hay and their dam's hard feed if they are able to access it. As the microorganism populations in newborns' hindguts need several months to fully develop, this additional forage will not be digested effectively. Yet, by two to three months of age, as their digestive system develops, this additional forage will play an increasingly important part of the foal's diet and should be encouraged as the foal approaches weaning age.

During the foal's third month of life, the mare will generally reach and pass peak lactation; this is the point when the mare's milk production drops, while the foal's nutritional needs continue to increase. At this point, it is important to assess whether the foal requires additional feeding to meet its nutritional requirements. In cases where the foal has access to quality pasture and/or hay, and is sharing its dam's daily hard feeds, the declining ratio of mare's milk in the foal's diet will be complemented by a gradual increase of other feed sources.

However, in cases where the mare is a particularly good “doer” and therefore being fed minimal amounts, or the pasture is either limited or of poor quality, the foal may need to be supplemented via creep feeding. Creep feeding involves providing the foal with supplementary feed that the mare cannot access; this is generally achieved by creating a pen that the foal can walk into but the mare cannot due to the height or width of the opening.

*“It is critically important to avoid overfeeding.”*

In situations where the foal is either sharing the mare's rations or being creep fed, it is important to choose a feed that is suitable for lactating mares and young foals, and has the correct balance of vitamins, minerals, energy and protein. Barastoc Breed n Grow is a popular choice, being a low-starch formula with enhanced levels of macro and trace minerals to support bone growth and development. It is critically important to avoid overfeeding, as overweight foals are more prone to developmental orthopaedic disease. Using a weight tape to assess the foal's weight and progress is recommended, along with close adherence to manufacturer's feeding rate recommendations.

## AT WEANING TIME

In a natural environment, mares wean their foals at around 10 to 12 months of age, however, domesticated foals are typically weaned at five to six months of age. Weaning before four months of age is not recommended unless veterinary advice regarding the mare or foal's health necessitates this. For foals that have been well prepared for weaning via correct feeding and management, the weaning process can be quite uneventful – however, being aware of the risks associated with weaning, such as ulcer development, can help ensure a smooth transition from foal to weanling status.

In preparation for weaning, a foal's ration should be increased over a two to three week period, with constant access to pasture if possible, and free choice hay provided. The importance of making gradual diet changes is well documented for horses of all ages, however, this principle is never more relevant than during the weaning process. At this time of great change, maintaining consistency in the weanling's diet will help limit stress and ill-thrift, regardless of whether a gradual or immediate weaning method is employed. In addition to adopting good practices such as the use of a weaning “buddy”, maintaining access to pasture grazing and quality hay is helpful for the weanling's physical and mental wellbeing during this process.

## FROM WEANLING TO YEARLING

Once a foal is completely weaned and no longer nursing at all, it should be consuming between 2-3% of its body weight in feed and forage a day. This is a time of remarkable bone development and growth in muscle mass – from weanling age to their second birthday, a young horse may double in weight!

**A diet consisting of 17% protein** is recommended for weanlings, with adequate energy sources to satisfy their growth and activity rate, such as **Barastoc Breed n Grow**. Ensure that the weanling's diet does not contain less than 30% roughage, measured by weight. Roughage may come in the form of pasture, good quality hay or alternative fibre sources such as Speedi-beet.

*“Continue assessing the animal as an individual.”*

As the young horse approaches its first birthday, it is important to continue assessing the animal as an individual, noting its condition and environment and adjusting the diet with consideration for the young horse's breed, maturity and desired growth rate. Diligent monitoring and record keeping, coupled with sound nutrition and a nurturing environment, will ensure that weanlings develop into sound, healthy horses with bright futures.