



## WHY IS WATER AND HYDRATION IN HORSES IMPORTANT?

As humans we are constantly reminded to drink plenty of water. When it comes to our horses though, we tend to be better at researching what food we are giving them, but not so much about how much water they need.

As with humans, water is one of the most important nutrients needed to keep healthy and combat fatigue. An average horse can drink between 20–40 litres of water per day. A lot more compared to the average human of around 3–5 litres.

The body is mostly made up of water – 65% for a horse and 80% for a foal. In the body it will be found within and around cells, in the blood and the digestive tract.

Its purpose is to transport nutrients and essentials round in order to carry out important body functions and processes. Studies have shown with a decrease of just 2% performance can be affected.

Not only does it affect performance, it can also cause more serious issues such as impaction which could lead to colic.

A lot of horse owners tend to only worry about dehydration during the hot summer periods but dehydration can happen at any time of the year and this is why your horse needs 24-hour access to clean, fresh water.

It can be extremely hard for owners to monitor how much their horse or pony is drinking, especially with automatic water troughs. Regularly check that the water drinker works properly.

### Feed stuffs and hydration

A horse's main source of hydration will be water (for 24/7 grazing, grass will cover most of the requirement) but their feed and forage can also provide a percentage:

- Dry hay: up to 14% moisture
- Spring grass: up to 85% moisture
- Summer grass: up to 75% moisture
- Compound feed: up to 14% moisture
- Soaked sugar beet: up to 80% moisture

Thankfully long gone are the days where owners had to wait lengthy periods of time to soak their beet pulp before feeding. Now there are mash products that can be soaked in a matter of minutes and offer the same benefits of providing moisture.

### Mashes

Mash is basically a term given to a feed product that requires soaking before feeding. The majority of mashes are fibre based and then supplemented with other feedstuffs such as herbs or cereals.

Some mashes, like Barastoc Fibre Beet Mash are designed to help with gaining condition, and are ideal for those with poor dentation or fussy eaters.

Feeding a mash for hydration is extremely beneficial as these feeds absorb the water, making it far easier to get fluids to your horse. Both high fibre feeds Speedi-Beet and Fibre-Beet Mash absorb up to 80% (three-five times their own weight) of water.

If your horse or pony spends more time in the stable during winter, and their diet changes to more hay, which is significantly lower in water content, these fibre-based mashes will benefit in re-hydration. There is no strict rule on too much water when soaking these mashes, if you are concerned about your horse being dehydrated you can simply add more water to the feeds.



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Depending on character, some horses are reluctant to drinking cold water in winter. Research has shown that some horses are less likely to drink by 14% during this period – another great reason to try and incorporate a fibre mash during winter.

Did you know? That you can make Speedi-Beet and Fibre-Beet Mash with warm water to help raise core body temperature. So, as well as hydrating, owners can help keep their horse a little bit cosier during the chilly nights.

### Signs of dehydration

- Your horse or pony is lethargic
- A noticeable difference in performance especially earlier on in the training session
- If urine is darker in colour

There are also some tests owners can carry out to check for dehydration. The most well-known is the pinch test – looking at the elasticity of the skin.

Along the horse's neck, pinch a section of the skin and then let go. If it immediately goes back to normal your horse is most likely ok, but if it is slow to flatten it could mean dehydration.

Checking their gums – they should be 'slimy' to the touch; if they are tacky this could also mean they are dehydrated.

Staying with the gums, owners can check the capillary refill time. By pressing your thumb on an area of the gum until it turns white and then removing allows time for the gum to recover. The blood vessels should refill in about two seconds, any longer is a sign of dehydration.

These tests have been around for many years but recent research suggests they aren't fully reliable. If the above signs and tests are present, this can be rectified by effectively getting water back in to the equines system, however if you are struggling to get fluids in, consult your vet.

### How do electrolytes play a role?

Through intense work or on hot days, the body's response is to sweat to try and keep cool and, in this process, important minerals like electrolytes (or body salts) are lost.

Electrolytes are found in fluids that go around the body and focus on cells that affect neuro-muscular functions. This links to dehydration and the loss of electrolytes to fatigue and compromised performance.

Some horses tend to replenish their intake on their own when a salt lick is provided or there are broad-spectrum of supplements on the market to help also.

**Consult an equine nutritionist for any advice.**

