

Choosing the best feed for **competition horses** is less about finding one “perfect” product and more about building the right **performance nutrition** plan for the individual horse. The ideal **performance diet** supports **stamina**, **muscle recovery**, focus, and a **healthy weight** without upsetting the **digestive system**. That means the answer depends on workload, temperament, forage quality, and how well the horse uses energy.

A good **horse feed company uk** will usually recommend starting with **forage**, then balancing the ration with the right level of **starch**, **oil**, **protein**, **vitamins**, and **minerals**. For many horses, especially those in regular work, a forage-led approach with added **digestible fibre** is the foundation of **equine nutrition**. From there, the feed choice should reflect the horse’s training load, **body condition score**, and how much extra support is needed for energy release and recovery.

What competition horses need from their feed

Competition horses need more than extra calories. They need a carefully **balanced ration** that matches energy supply to workload while protecting **gut health** and supporting a calm, workable attitude. The best results usually come from **performance nutrition** that provides **slow-release energy** rather than sudden peaks and troughs.

The first step is assessing the horse’s current shape, ideally with a **body condition score**. A horse that is too lean may need more energy density, while a horse that stores weight easily may do better on a more controlled diet with higher fibre and lower starch. This is where ration analysis matters: the aim is to match the feed to the horse’s **feed intake**, workload, and metabolism.

Forage should always be the base of the diet. Good-quality hay or **haylage** provides the **digestible fibre** needed for the horse’s **digestive system**, especially the **hindgut**, which plays a major role in energy extraction and overall health. A **forage-based diet** helps maintain a steady flow of fibre through the gut, supporting **gut health** and reducing the risk of digestive upset.

For horses in work, forage alone is often not enough to meet energy needs. That is why many riders add a conditioning or performance feed. The right choice gives **energy release** without making the horse overly sharp or difficult. In practical terms, that usually means using a diet built around digestible fibre, sensible starch levels, and enough oil and protein to support **muscle development** and recovery.

Another key point is palatability. If a feed tastes good, the horse is more likely to maintain consistent intake, which matters when training intensity increases. Poor feed intake can quickly undermine **sustained stamina** and recovery, especially through the **competition season**.

How to choose the right feed for performance

When choosing feed for a horse in work, think in terms of ingredients and function rather than marketing labels. The best **performance diet** usually combines **forage** with a concentrated feed tailored to the horse’s needs. The main building blocks are **starch**, **oil**, **protein**, and fibre, with minerals and vitamins used to complete the ration.

Starch provides quick energy and can be useful for horses with high athletic output, but too much can create unwanted excitability and digestive strain. Excess starch may also reduce feed conversion efficiency in some horses, especially if the ration is not properly balanced. If a horse is sensitive, a lower-starch feed with more fibre and oil can often improve energy release while keeping behaviour more even.

Oil is a valuable source of concentrated calories and is often used in performance nutrition because it offers **slow-release energy**. It can be particularly useful for horses that need extra condition or sustained effort over longer sessions. Oil is not a quick fix, but over time it supports a more stable energy supply and can help horses maintain a healthier weight without relying too heavily on starch.

Protein is equally important, especially for horses in hard work that need support for **muscle recovery** and repair after training. The quality of protein matters as much as the quantity, and the right feed should include the essential **amino acids**, particularly **lysine**, to help maintain topline and support **muscle development**. This becomes even more important when training load rises.

A practical way to choose is to look at the horse's workload and temperament:

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- For a horse that needs calm, steady energy, choose a fibre-led feed with moderate calories.
- For a horse losing condition, choose a more energy-dense option with added oil and digestible fibre.
- For a horse building muscle, prioritise quality protein and adequate lysine.
- For a horse needing sharper performance, use starch carefully rather than in excess.

In many cases, a combination of forage, a suitable concentrate, and targeted nutritional support works better than one high-energy product. The best feed is the one that supports the horse's workload without compromising behaviour, digestion, or recovery.

Best feed types for different types of competition work

Different disciplines place different demands on the horse. That means the ideal feed varies by workload, intensity, and the type of effort required. A horse doing short, explosive work needs a different ration from one doing prolonged aerobic exercise.

Show jumping horses need power, focus, and quick recovery between efforts. They often benefit from a feed that provides controlled energy release, moderate starch, and enough protein to support muscle repair. If a horse becomes too fresh on cereal-heavy rations, a more fibre-based option with added oil may improve rideability.

Dressage horses usually need sustained power with a calm temperament. Here, consistency is key. Many dressage horses do well on a forage-led diet with a **feed balancer** or low-intake concentrate that supplies vitamins, minerals, and amino acids without unnecessary calories. This helps maintain a polished outline while supporting topline and body condition.

Eventing horses need a blend of stamina and recovery support because their work can vary from flatwork to jumping to galloping. They often need more calories overall, but those calories should be delivered in a way that supports **sustained stamina** rather than short-lived energy spikes. Fibre, oil, and quality protein are especially useful here.

Endurance horses rely heavily on aerobic efficiency and hydration. Their feeding plan should focus on fibre, oil, and enough electrolytes to replace losses during long efforts. These horses often do best on low-starch, high-fibre diets because a stable energy supply helps the body keep working efficiently over time. In endurance work, digestibility and palatability are vital, as feed intake can be challenged by travel, heat, and the demands of the day.

Across all disciplines, the common thread is that feed should match the horse's training load and individual response. A horse that performs best on a smaller, fibre-rich ration should not be pushed into a cereal-heavy programme just because another horse benefits from it.

Key nutrients that support stamina, muscle, and recovery

Once the energy source is right, the next step is making sure the ration includes the nutrients that help the horse perform, recover after exercise, and stay healthy throughout the competition season.

Amino acids are essential for building and repairing muscle tissue. Of these, **lysine** is one of the most important because it supports protein synthesis and topline maintenance. Horses in hard work need enough high-quality protein to supply these building blocks, especially when training sessions are frequent or intense.

Electrolytes help replace minerals lost in sweat and are especially important for horses that work hard, travel often, or compete in warm conditions. Without enough electrolytes, hydration and recovery can suffer, which may affect stamina and overall performance.

Vitamins and **minerals** support almost every aspect of equine nutrition, from energy metabolism to hoof quality and immune function. A performance ration should provide balanced levels of these nutrients so that the horse can cope with the demands of training and travel. Commonly important minerals include sodium, calcium, phosphorus, zinc, and selenium, depending [fast delivery horse feed online](#) on the overall diet and forage analysis.

Magnesium is often discussed in relation to behaviour and muscle function. While it is not a magic solution for excitable horses, it does play a role in normal nerve and muscle activity. If the diet is deficient, correcting it can be helpful as part of a broader performance nutrition plan.

These nutrients work best as part of a complete system, not as isolated fixes. A horse with the right **forage**, sensible calorie intake, and balanced micronutrients is usually better placed to develop **muscle recovery**, maintain a healthy weight, and deliver consistent results.

When to use balancers, cubes, mixes, and fibre feeds

Feed form matters almost as much as feed content. The choice between a **compound feed**, **feed balancer**, **chaff**, **pellets**, or a fibre feed depends on how much energy the horse needs and how much concentrate it can comfortably eat.

A **feed balancer** is ideal when a horse is on good-quality forage but still needs nutritional support. It provides concentrated vitamins, minerals, amino acids, and often extra support for gut health without adding many calories. Balancers are especially useful for good-doers, horses in lighter work, or horses that become too hot on richer rations.

A **compound feed** may suit horses that need more complete energy and protein support in one product. These feeds are usually designed to simplify the ration and can be useful when the horse needs a more substantial intake of calories, but the exact formula should still match the horse's workload and temperament.

Conditioning feed is often chosen for horses that struggle to maintain weight or muscle over the **competition season**. It tends to be more calorie-dense and may include a blend of starch, oil, and fibre to help with healthy weight gain and improved body condition.

Chaff is helpful for adding chew time, slowing down feed intake, and improving palatability. It can be mixed with cubes or pellets to create a more suitable texture and support good digestion. This may also help horses that bolt their food or become unsettled when their ration is too concentrated.

Pellets are often useful because they are easy to measure, consistent, and less prone to selective feeding. They can work well as part of a balanced ration, especially when combined with forage and a balancer.

A **grain-free feed** may be the right choice when a horse does not tolerate high starch well, needs calmer energy, or performs best on a high-fibre diet. Grain-free does not automatically mean better, but it can be a strong option for many performance horses when used appropriately.

How to feed around training and competition days

Feeding around exercise is about timing, consistency, and protecting the horse's digestive function. A solid **feeding schedule** helps maintain energy levels, supports **gut health**, and reduces the risk of digestive upset when the horse is travelling or competing.

On training days, feed the horse so that exercise does not take place immediately after a large meal. Allowing time for digestion reduces discomfort and supports better movement. On competition days, the feed plan should prioritise familiarity. Keep the diet as close to the usual routine as possible to avoid stressing the horse's **digestive system**.

Hydration is a major part of performance nutrition. Horses in work need access to clean water at all times, and intake can drop when travel, excitement, or weather changes interfere with normal routines. Offering soaked feeds, plenty of forage, and appropriate electrolytes can help support hydration and recovery.

Pre-competition feeding should not be experimental. Stick to feeds the horse already knows, and avoid sudden changes in quantity or ingredient type. A small, familiar meal with forage and enough time before work is often better than a large, late feed. The goal is to keep the horse comfortable, settled, and ready to perform.

For horses with sensitive digestion, fibre-rich rations and steady meal times are especially important. Consistency supports the hindgut, helps the horse manage stress, and can improve overall feed conversion. In many cases, the best strategy is a predictable feeding rhythm that complements the training plan rather than fighting it.

Common feeding mistakes that hurt performance

Even a talented horse can underperform if the ration is badly designed. Some of the most common mistakes are easy to avoid once you understand the risks.

One major issue is **colic** risk linked to poor feeding management. Sudden changes in forage, concentrate type, or meal size can upset the gut and disrupt the hindgut microbiome. This is why gradual transitions are essential, especially during the competition season when travel and routine changes are common.

Sudden diet changes are a frequent cause of performance problems. Horses need time to adapt to new levels of starch, fibre, oil, or protein. A change that looks harmless on paper can trigger loose droppings, reduced appetite, or a drop in energy if introduced too quickly.

Overfeeding starch is another mistake. While starch can be useful, too much may create **energy spikes**, tension, or digestive stress. Some horses become sharp and difficult to ride, while others show signs of reduced gut comfort. A more balanced approach often works better, especially for horses that need sustained focus and steady stamina.

Another issue is underestimating the importance of forage. If the ration is too concentrate-heavy, the horse may not get enough fibre for a healthy gut environment. That can undermine recovery, behaviour, and long-term soundness. For many horses, improving forage quality and quantity is a smarter first step than simply adding more hard feed.

Finally, not every horse needs more calories. Sometimes the problem is not energy shortage but poor ration design. The best feeding plans are built around the horse's workload, body condition, temperament, and how well the feed supports the digestive system.

FAQ

What is the best feed for a competition horse?

The best feed for a competition horse is one that matches workload, temperament, and digestive needs. For many horses, this means a forage-based diet with the right balance of starch, oil, protein, amino acids, vitamins, and minerals. Some horses do well on a feed balancer plus forage, while others need a conditioning feed or compound feed to maintain stamina and muscle recovery.

Should competition horses be fed more starch or more oil?

It depends on the horse. Starch can provide quick energy, but too much may increase excitability or upset gut health. Oil offers slower, more sustained energy and is often better for horses needing controlled calories. Many performance diets use a combination, but the balance should suit the horse's training load and temperament.

Do competition horses need a feed balancer?

Not every horse needs one, but many do benefit from a feed balancer. It is especially useful when the horse is on good forage but needs extra nutritional support without many extra calories. A balancer can help cover vitamins, minerals, amino acids, and lysine while keeping the ration controlled.

Is grain-free feed better for performance horses?

Grain-free feed can be a very good option for some performance horses, particularly those that are sensitive to starch or do better on a fibre-led ration. However, grain-free does not automatically mean better. The key is whether the feed provides the right energy release, palatability, and nutritional support for the individual horse.

How often should I feed a horse in hard work?

Most horses in hard work do better with several smaller meals rather than large quantities in one go. This supports feed intake, gut health, and a steadier energy supply. The exact feeding schedule should be based on forage access, workload, and the amount of concentrate needed, but consistency is always important.