

Choosing the best-suited horse feed in cold weather is not just about finding one “best” product and instead about adjusting the diet to the horse’s winter energy needs, body condition score, workload, and access to forage. Cold weather changes how horses use calories, how much roughage they need, and how important hydration and digestive health become. A sensible winter feeding plan starts with forage first, then adds hard feed only where it is needed for weight maintenance, performance, or extra support.

This guide details the main types of horse feed, how to evaluate feed value, how to follow a simple horse feeding chart, and in what cases a complete horse feed or balancer makes sense. It also includes budget, common feeding mistakes, and practical horse feed advice uk owners can use during winter.

Why horses need different feed in winter

Cold-weather nutrition is not just “more of the same.” Equines use extra energy to keep warm through thermoregulation, especially when temperatures fall, wind increases, or their coat and shelter are insufficient to maintain their comfort. So winter energy needs can rise even if work doesn't change.

First to assess is the body condition score. A horse already in lean condition may drop weight fast if forage intake is limited or if the diet does not have enough calorie density. A horse that stays easy-keeping may not need much extra hard feed at all, but still still needs adequate roughage for intestinal health and consistent calorie intake.

Forage intake is the basis of winter feeding. Hay, haylage supply fibre, which promotes healthy digestion and aids in maintaining body heat through the fermentation process in the hind gut. A diet based on forage is usually the safest foundation, with hard feed added only if the horse cannot keep weight, is in work, or needs extra protein, vitamins and minerals.

Cold weather also influences appetite, water intake, and feed digestibility. Horses often consume more forage when offered enough, but some cut back if the feed is low quality or hard to chew. That is why the best horse feed in winter is the one that supports forage, supports weight maintenance, and matches the individual horse’s body condition score.

Varieties of horse feed to consider in freezing weather

There are many types of horse feed on the market, but in winter the most practical options tend to fall into a few clear categories. The right choice depends on whether your horse needs extra calories, more fibre, improved digestibility, or a straightforward way to top up vitamins and minerals.

Complete horse feed is made to provide a full ration when fed at the recommended amount. It can be beneficial for horses that struggle to eat enough forage or need a practical, consistent feeding plan. A complete horse feed can also reduce the need to mix several buckets of different products.

Mixes and cubes are standard hard feed options. Mixes usually combine cereals, fibre sources, oil, and micronutrients, while cubes tend to be steadier and easier to measure. These can be useful for horses needing a organised hard feed alongside forage, especially where the aim is to increase calorie intake without feeding large amounts.

Calorie-dense feed is best for horses that lose condition in winter, work regularly, or need extra fuel without a big rise in bucket size. Energy-dense feeds often use oil, digestible fibre, and controlled starch levels rather than relying heavily on starch and sugar.

Other practical options include conditioning feed, which is aimed at weight gain or maintaining condition, and a balancer, which supplies vitamins and minerals with very little calories. A ration balancer can be a wise choice for horses on a forage-based diet that needs nutritional fine-tuning rather than more bulk.

When comparing horse feed companies, look at fibre, protein, starch levels, sugar content, and whether the feed is appropriate for your horse's performance level. Product names matter less than the nutrition profile and how it matches the rest of the ration.

How to choose the most suitable horse feed for your horse

Horse feed for first-time buyers can feel unclear because every bag seems to claim conditioning, shine, performance, or calm behaviour. The easiest way to choose is to start with horse feeding rules: check the horse, assess the forage, then fill the gaps.

Age and workload are key. A young horse, veteran, broodmare, or horse in regular work may need extra support than an easy-keeping horse at rest. A horse in low work often does best on forage and a balancer. A horse in moderate or hard work may need a more energy-dense hard feed or complete horse feed to cover higher calorie demand.

Digestive health should guide the decision too. Horses are designed for frequent intake of fibre, so anything that helps maintain gut health is valuable. That means prioritising forage, avoiding sudden feed transition, and choosing feeds with sensible starch levels. Horses prone to digestive upset may do better on fibre-based feeds, chopped forage, or a balancer rather than a cereal-heavy ration.

Ask 3 questions before buying:

- Does the horse need weight gain, maintenance, or performance support?
- Is the current forage enough, or is the horse losing condition?
- Will this feed improve the ration without increasing starch and sugar too much?

If the answer points to simple maintenance, a balancer and forage may be enough. If the horse is thin, working hard, or struggling to eat enough, a conditioning feed or complete horse feed may be more suitable.

Horse feeding chart: feeding amounts in winter

This feeding chart is a useful reference, but it should always be tweaked using body weight, condition score, and hay quality. A horse feed calculator uk tool can help estimate daily intake, yet it should not replace close observation.

As a general rule, most horses should receive roughage as the basis of the ration, with hard feed added according to need. The forage ration is the main part of winter feeding, **overweight horse feed** because it supports hydration, warmth, and digestive health.

Use the following easy winter guide:

- **Small pony or good-doer at rest:** forage-led ration, minimal hard feed, balancer if needed.
- **Average horse in light work:** unrestricted or generous forage, small amount of hard feed or balancer.
- **Horse in regular work or losing weight:** more forage plus conditioning feed or complete horse feed.
- **Thin horse or poor doer:** increase forage first, then add calorie-dense feed if required.

Bodyweight matters because feed should be set to size rather than guessed. A larger horse typically needs more forage and a larger total ration, while a smaller horse may maintain on less. If you are unsure, weigh-tape estimates and condition score checks are better than eye-balling alone.

A practical approach is to monitor the horse weekly through winter. If weight is dropping, increase forage before increasing bucket feed. If the horse is holding condition, you may not need to change much at all. If the horse is getting too fat, reduce unnecessary calories while keeping forage available.

10 rules of feeding horses in winter

Effective winter feeding relies on consistent routines. These horse feeding rules can help you sidestep common problems and maintain a balanced ration all winter long.

1. **Start with forage.** Make hay or haylage the foundation before adding hard feed.
2. **Feed small meals.** Big bucket feeds are less suitable than small meals given across the day.
3. **Provide fresh water.** Hydration matters in winter and supports gut function.
4. **Watch body condition score.** Adjust feed before the horse gets too thin or too fat.
5. **Raise fibre before starch.** Fibre is the safer and more natural choice for the horse.
6. **Pick feeds that are easy to digest.** Better digestibility supports better calorie use.
7. **Limit sudden changes.** Any feed change should be gradual to support digestive health.
8. **Inspect the forage quality.** Poor hay may need supplement support or a better forage source.
9. **Match feed to workload.** The ration should reflect the horse's performance level.
10. **Monitor weekly.** Weight, appetite, droppings, and behaviour all matter.

These rules matter especially where frost, mud, and limited turnout disrupt routine. A horse that spends more time stabled may need different calorie support than one with access to grass, but in both cases forage and freshness matter most.

When a complete horse feed makes sense

A complete horse feed makes sense when you want one solution to deliver a balanced ration alongside forage, particularly for horses that need simplicity or are difficult to keep in good condition. It is often helpful where management time is limited or where the horse needs a dependable source of vitamins and minerals.

The advantage of a complete horse feed is that it can help form a balanced ration without lots of extra mixing. For horses on a forage-based diet, it can be a straightforward way to cover vitamins and minerals while adding calories and fibre in a more controlled way than cereal-heavy feeds.

That said, a complete horse feed is not automatically the answer for every horse. Some do better with forage and a ration balancer. Others need conditioning feed because they need more energy and protein. The best choice depends on body condition, workload, and how much forage the horse is already eating.

If the horse is a poor doer, older, or struggling to maintain condition through winter, a complete horse feed may be a sensible option. If the horse is an easy keeper, a lighter balancer-based ration is often enough.

Spillers horse feed plus other well-known alternatives

Spillers horse feed is one of a number of popular options available from horse feed companies in the UK. Many horse owners compare brands not just by reputation, but by how effectively the feed suits a horse's winter

energy needs, gut health, and body condition score.

Common product types include conditioning feed, winter balancer options, fibre-based cubes, and complete horse feed formulations. A conditioning feed is often chosen for horses that need added weight or better top-line coverage. A winter balancer can work well for horses on mostly forage, especially where you want to supply vitamins and minerals without adding excess calories.

When comparing products from horse feed companies, study the nutrition label carefully. Look at protein, fibre, starch, and sugar, and think about how the feed matches the rest of the ration. A feed with lower starch may be the better option for horses needing calm energy, while a conditioning feed may suit a horse needing more calorie density.

Brand matters less than suitability. Spillers horse feed may be the right fit for one horse, while another may do better on a different mix, cube, or balancer. The best approach is to tailor the feed to the horse, not the label.

How much does horse feed cost in winter?

Horse feed cost is a major part of winter planning because many horses need additional forage, additional bedding, and sometimes a changed hard feed through the colder months. If you are trying to find out how much does horse feed cost, the simple answer is that it depends on the ration, the horse, and the feed value of the products you choose.

Budgeting should start with the biggest cost: forage. Hay and haylage are often the base of winter feeding, so it makes sense to compare value by nutrition as well as price per bale or bag. A cheaper product is not good value if the horse needs far more of it or still loses condition.

Feed value is best judged by what you get per day, not just the shelf price. A more expensive complete horse feed may actually be cost-effective if it reduces the number of supplements and provides a balanced ration. A balancer can also be a good value if the horse does not need many extra calories.

When budgeting, remember to include:

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- Forage and roughage
- Hard feed or conditioning feed
- Supplements or balancer
- Wastage from poor storage or refusal

The cheapest plan is not always the best one. The aim is to spend where it boosts condition, digestive health, and winter stability.

Simple horse feed advice for winter management

Practical horse feed advice uk owners can rely on starts with a forage first mindset. If a horse is warm, calm, and holding condition on forage and a balancer, there may be little reason to add more. If the horse is losing weight, increase forage quality or quantity before introducing more bucket feed.

Blanket use also affects the ration. A horse wearing rugs may need less calorie support than an unclipped, exposed horse, because the blanket reduces energy spent on thermoregulation. That does not mean you should feed less automatically, but it is one factor in the overall plan.

Weight monitoring should be routine through winter. Use a body condition score, weigh tape, or both. Track changes in ribs, neck crest, topline, and overall coverage. Small changes are easier to correct than major losses later on.

Effective winter care is about regularity: scheduled feeding times, fresh water, enough forage, and thoughtful adjustment when conditions change.

Frequent pitfalls to avoid when winter feeding

Winter feeding mistakes often come from trying to solve weight loss too quickly. Rapid diet changes can upset the gut, reduce intake, and increase the risk of digestive problems. Any feed transition should be step-by-step.

Another common issue is overfeeding starch. Too much starch and sugar can make some horses harder to manage and may increase laminitis risk in sensitive animals. High-starch rations can also be less forgiving when the horse is not working hard enough to use the energy efficiently.

Colic risk is another concern. Horses need consistent forage, fresh water, and a [low sugar feed for horses](#) steady feeding routine. Long gaps between meals, poor hydration, or abrupt changes in forage or hard feed can all contribute to problems.

Other mistakes include:

- Depending on bucket feed instead of forage
- Neglecting body condition score
- Giving large meals instead of small meals
- Changing feeds too quickly
- Choosing a product based only on price or label claims

Winter feeding should prioritize gut health first, then support condition and workload.

How to build a winter feed plan

A good winter feed plan is simple, written down, and based on observation. Start by listing the forage available, the horse's current body condition score, and the workload. Then decide whether the horse needs only forage and a balancer, or whether it needs a harder-working ration with conditioning feed or complete horse feed.

If you want a practical horse feed mix recipe, think in terms of ingredients rather than exact brands: forage, a fibre-based base, a measured source of calories, and a balancer or supplement plan to cover vitamins and minerals. That might mean chopped fibre, cubes, oil, and a balancer, or a complete horse feed plus hay and fresh water. The exact mix should match the horse's needs and any digestive sensitivities.

Create the feed schedule around routine. Break up the ration into smaller meals and keep forage available as consistently as possible. Then check the plan every one to two weeks during winter and adjust for weight changes, weather, and exercise level.

For forage analysis, check dry matter, energy, protein, and sugar if you can. That helps you know whether the forage itself is doing most of the nutritional work or whether the horse needs more support from the bucket.

Quick quiz: what should I feed my horse?

Use this short quiz as a decision guide rather than a strict rulebook. It can help you turn observation into a feeding decision.

- **What is the horse's body condition?** Too lean, just right, or carrying extra condition?
- **What is the work level?** At rest, in light work, or in more demanding performance work?
- **How good is the forage?** Abundant hay or haylage, or restricted roughage?
- **Does the horse need more calories or just better balance?**
- **Is digestive health stable?** Any signs of loose droppings, reduced appetite, or discomfort?

If the horse is in good condition, on decent forage, and not working hard, the answer is often forage plus balancer. If the horse is losing weight, the feeding decision may shift towards a conditioning feed or complete horse feed. If there are digestive concerns, a slower, fibre-led approach is usually safer.

FAQs about feeding horses in winter

What horse feed is best for horses in winter?

The best horse feed in winter is the one that supports the horse's body condition score, workload, and digestive health. For many horses, a forage-based diet with hay or haylage, plus a balancer, is enough. Horses that lose weight or work harder may need a complete horse feed or conditioning feed with controlled starch and sugar.

Do horses need more feed in winter?

Often, yes. Horses may have higher winter energy needs because they use more calories for thermoregulation. That does not always mean more hard feed, though. Many horses do better with more forage first, then a small increase in bucket feed only if needed for weight maintenance or work.

Is hay or hard feed better in cold weather?

For the majority of horses, forage is preferable than hard feed as the primary winter dietary base. Hay and haylage promote roughage intake, gut health, and body heat through digestion. Hard feed has a place when extra calories, protein, vitamins and minerals, or performance support are needed, but it should not replace forage.

How do I know if my horse is getting enough food in winter?

Assess body condition score, weight trends, appetite, coat, droppings, and energy. If the horse is maintaining condition, has sound digestive health, and is bright and content, the ration is probably about right. If the horse is losing weight, seems tucked up, or is leaving forage because it is not enough or less inviting, the ration needs review.

Can I change my horse's feed suddenly in winter?

No. Sudden diet changes can disrupt the digestive system and increase the risk of colic. A feed transition should be steady, especially when changing forage, adding hard feed, or switching to a new balancer or conditioning feed. Make adjustments carefully and monitor intake and behaviour closely.