

Q & A—Bulking Up an Aged Broodmare

Q I recently acquired a 15-year-old mare that is in dire need of weight. I plan to use her as a broodmare with the hope of breeding her in the spring. My veterinarian has encouraged me to increase the mare's body condition prior to breeding season. What's the quickest way to do this?

A First and foremost, keep in close contact with your veterinarian. In addition to the general feeding guidelines I will outline here, your mare may require specialized care such as that given by a competent equine dentist. An appropriate deworming schedule, one based on your geographic region, should be formulated for the mare and instituted immediately. In addition to a vigorous deworming protocol, there may be a need to determine if the mare has gastric ulcers. Horses that have been cooped up in stalls or similar enclosures without access to full-time grazing are prone to gastric ulcers, and their presence may hinder weight gain. Gastric endoscopy can be performed by a veterinarian to determine the presence of ulcers.


As far as a nutrition program for this mare, start with the foundation, which is always forage. If a way can be found, the mare should be allowed to graze as much as possible. In most areas of the country, pasture offers up little in the way of high-calorie options at this time of year. However, being able to roam and nibble grasses at will should help any lingering problems with gastric ulcers, if they were indeed a problem. In addition to whatever pasture she can rustle up, the mare should be given plenty of good-quality hay at a rate of at least 2.5% of her body weight. Type of hay is not as important as quality of hay, though some high-calorie alfalfa may add a few more calories. If she cleans up her hay, be sure to throw her another flake or two.

In the pursuit of weight gain, forage alone will not provide sufficient calories. Therefore, a well-formulated concentrate or grain mix must be supplied. Because of the mare's condition and the desire for her to gain weight, a

high-calorie feed would be appropriate. These feeds tend to have elevated levels of fat and fermentable fiber, dietary components that add much-needed calories to the diet. Though total daily intake should not exceed recommended levels, these feeds are generally safer to feed than traditional concentrates because of their low starch content. Remember, no more than five pounds of grain should be fed in any one meal.

Once the mare has acclimated to this new diet—and this may take several weeks—additional energy sources may be added. Typically, these include vegetable oils or rice bran, both of which are high in fat. The daily allotment of fat supplement should be spread between meals.

As soon as the mare arrives at a suitable weight for her frame, her diet must be adjusted to maintain that weight. The fat supplements should be the first components removed from her diet. From there, her concentrate intake can be tweaked. Be sure to always offer plenty of nutritious forage.

An important thing to remember: Weight gain takes time. There is no way to fuel weight gain except through increased consumption of calories in the slowest and safest way possible. Once the mare has been successfully switched to an appropriate diet and any health issues have been resolved, she will begin to gain weight and will then be in optimal condition to conceive a foal and carry it to term. 

Aged mares are just as capable of producing healthy foals as their younger herdmates. Attention must be given to any special needs they may have. The most usual consideration will be modification of the diet so a mare is guaranteed sufficient energy for maintenance of her own body weight as well as growth of her fetus.





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