



RE-FEEDING SYNDROME

Why do we feed very small amounts of feed to a starving horse?

Feeding a starved horse concentrated calories can lead to a condition called re-feeding syndrome. This syndrome can cause heart, kidney and respiratory failure 3 – 5 days after the first feed. Insulin levels increase from the calorie intake which creates changes in electrolytes and subsequent respiratory failure. The red blood cells collapse which stops oxygen transfer and the horse will go into re-feeding syndrome causing death.

Essentially it is the electrolyte imbalance which is the root of the complications.

When an emaciated horse is fed a high carbohydrate meal, insulin is released in response to the high starch levels. Insulin is a hormone that stores carbohydrates in cells for use as an energy source. At the same time, the released insulin pulls magnesium and phosphorous out of circulation and into the cell.

During starvation, the horse's electrolytes have been depleted and the starved horse doesn't have additional stores available for normal functioning. Over the course of the next several days a cumulative effect occurs during each feeding of high carbohydrate feed. The continued depletion of these electrolytes can lead to death by respiratory, cardiac or kidney failure. In such cases, death usually occurs within 3 to 5 days.

This means that for the first 7 – 10 days the horse should be fed small amounts of good quality Rhodes grassy hay only. After 7 - 10 days the horse can have unlimited grassy hay and very small hard feed meals may be introduced.

There is a huge difference between a skinny horse and an emaciated horse. Sadly when horses get to the emaciated stage, it is almost too late and any change can kill them very quickly.

With a severely starved horse its body will use any muscle it can use for energy when it's in a truly starved situation and the animal's heart is a muscle as well. These severely starved horses may not only have cardiac problems but also many other long term consequences.

The first 2 weeks are always critical. We therefore, take things very very slowly.

This is generalised information and should not be treated as veterinary advice. Please consult your own vet regarding the specific treatment of your own horse.

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