

10 Draft Horse Health Facts

The gentle giants of the horse world possess many unique physical traits, from leg feathers to dinner-plate-sized hooves. They also are prone to developing a variety of genetic and health concerns and should be managed carefully. For this reason The Horse and Kathy Williamson, DVM, manager of veterinary services for Purina Animal Nutrition Center, have identified the following important points about draft horse health.



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1

Despite their imposing size and weight, **draft horses might require fewer calories**, pound for pound, than some of their light-horse counterparts. Researchers have suggested that energy requirements for idle draft horses might fall into the “Minimum Maintenance Requirement” category (1.4 Mcals/100 lbs body weight), according to the National Research Council’s *Nutrient Requirements of Horses* (2007), while a highly active Thoroughbred would likely fall into the “Elevated” category (1.65 Mcal/100 lbs body weight). Aim to feed healthy, mature draft horses 1-2.5% of their body weight per day in dry matter, with most of that in roughage.

2

Another nutritional consideration: The gene mutation that causes Type 1 **polysaccharide storage myopathy (PSSM)** is **common in Belgians and Percherons**. Researchers have revealed a prevalence of this gene in 38.9% of Belgians and 62.4% of Percherons (McCue et al. 2010). The presence of abnormal polysaccharide in muscle of horses that lack the Type 1 gene mutation is now defined as Type 2 PSSM, which also affects draft breeds. Many veterinarians recommend feeding horses with PSSM a diet that is high in fat and fiber and low in sugars and starches, with adequate amounts of balanced minerals, and institute a regular exercise program to help reduce problems associated with the diseases. But always check with your veterinarian before changing your horse’s diet.

3

Due to their lower skin to muscle area ratio in which to dissipate heat from working muscles, **draft horses are prone to heat stress and dehydration** and must be managed carefully in hot temperatures. If horses are turned out, ensure they have an adequate shaded area and that run-ins are large enough to comfortably accommodate them. If horses are stalled, consider using a barn-safe fan to keep the air moving and the animal cool. As with all breeds, ensure draft horses have access to fresh, clean water at all times.



4

Breeding draft horses can be challenging. Draft stallions tend to have a low sperm concentration and more gel in their ejaculate than light-breed stallions. Essentially, this can mean a more dilute ejaculate.

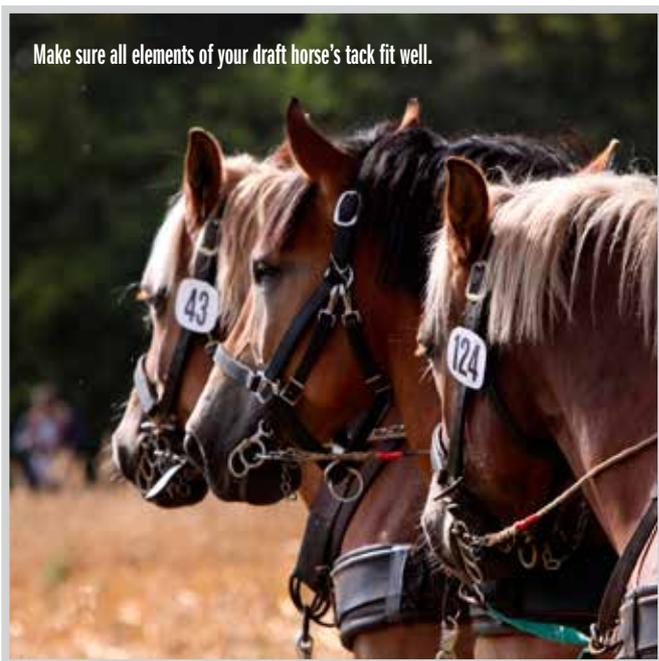
5 If you're planning to ride a draft horse, **ensure his tack fits appropriately**. Many draft horses have round backs with minimal withers, and a saddle designed for a light-breed horse could cause them back pain. Additionally, ensure a draft horse's bit is sized to fit the sensitive tissues of his mouth—a too-small bit can pinch his mouth and cause discomfort when riding. Seek help from a professional saddle fitter or veterinarian if you're unsure if your draft horse's tack fits well.

6 **Ensure draft horses receive the appropriate doses of medications, dewormers, and vaccinations.** Medications are typically administered on a per-pound basis, so make sure you know your horse's weight, and if your veterinarian prescribes a drug, work with him or her to ensure your horse receives the correct amount to treat his ailment. Also administer appropriate amounts of dewormer based on weight. Vaccines, on the other hand, work by stimulating the immune system and are not body-weight-dependent, so vaccine doses are the same for drafts as average-sized horses.

7 **Twins are a common reproductive complication** in draft horse mares, as 25% of draft mares ovulate two follicles during their heat cycle. Because draft mares have larger uteri compared to light-breed mares, they are also more likely to successfully carry twins into late gestation or even to term. In many cases veterinarians can identify twins via thorough ultrasonographic exams in early pregnancy and perform a twin reduction.



Twins are more common in draft mares than other breeds.



Make sure all elements of your draft horse's tack fit well.

8 **Historically, draft horses have suffered from a condition called sweeny**, which results from poorly fitted harnesses and yokes applying pressure to and damaging a nerve just above the point of the shoulder. This condition results in muscle atrophy over one or both shoulders and may impair forelimb movement.

9 **Red blood cell parameters** (red blood cell count, hemoglobin, hematocrit, etc.), determined by a complete blood count (CBC), are considerably lower in normal draft horses than in light breeds and Warmbloods. Keep this fact in mind when interpreting blood work results.

10 Not all draft breeds possess flowing locks, or feathers, around their hooves, but skin problems commonly occur in those that do. One of the most serious is **chronic progressive lymphedema**, in which the skin on the horses' lower legs thickens and develops encrusted lesions. The lesions appear similar to those found in horses with scratches (pastern dermatitis); however, they often do not respond well to treatment. Some horses with lymphedema develop potentially deadly secondary infections from open wounds.