**Understanding Feed and Supplement Labels**

Let’s face it, labels can be confusing. Have you ever glanced at the label on your bag or tub and thought ‘What does this mean?’, ‘Why have they said that?!’ This short guide will help you find your way around a label.

**Are labels different on supplements?**

Legally there is no such thing as a supplement. Under EU and UK law all powders, pellets and liquids that we think of as ‘supplements’ are simply feed. Most will be labelled ‘complementary feed’, but in some cases you may see ‘feed material’ (single ingredient) or ‘mineral feed’ (see ‘Ash’ section). As supplements come under feed law, the labels have to adhere to the same strict guidelines that all feeds do, as set out under UK retained EC Regulation 767/2009, on marketing feed. Just like feed, a detailed ingredient listing is required. The following guide explains more about the different information included on labels.

**What’s in the product - Ingredients**

Most of the major ingredients are classed as ‘feed materials’ and must be fully declared under the ‘Composition’ heading. Any complementary feed must contain at least two feed materials, while a ‘straight feed material’ will be a single ingredient, such as grass pellets, garlic or seaweed. Manufacturers aren’t required to include the levels for the feed materials (as opposed to nutrient levels which are given) – as that would effectively reveal commercial recipes – but there is a legal requirement to list the composition in inclusion order, so the largest ingredient will come first, down to the smallest.

If the product also includes technical ingredients they will be listed under ‘Additives’. It’s not unusual to have concerns regarding the term additives but actually it is a legal term used to describe everything from vitamins and minerals to yeast and prebiotics. Manufacturers have to use additives from an approved register for products sold in the UK. In order to gain approval, extensive scientific evidence must be submitted to prove the safety and suitability of the ingredient, and that will be specific to each species and for different lifestages for some ingredients. Care should be taken if purchasing products on-line from outside of the UK as they may not comply with current UK feed safety legislation and may be labelled very differently.

Environmental suitability is also monitored. Therefore, you can rest assured that ingredients listed under ‘Additives’, on a UK product, are safe for your horse and regulated to reduce the impact on the planet. Most, though not all, additives will be listed with numbers alongside, for example 3a300 for Vitamin C, or 3b606 for chelated zinc. These numbers are simply their register reference numbers and nothing to cause concern. Lastly, in contrast to feed materials, additives should include an inclusion rate, which typically will be given per kilogram, or per litre, from which you can calculate the amount per day from the feeding instructions.

**What’s in the product - Nutrients**

The levels of nutrients are given under the heading analytical constituents which can cause confusion as the information that has to be included by law is not always reader-friendly. Certain analysis is legally required, and this will typically include:

* Crude Protein
* Crude Fat
* Crude Fibre
* Crude Ash
* Sodium

You may also see other parameters, such as moisture, calcium, phosphorous and magnesium listed depending on their inclusion rates in the product. For single ingredient products, such as a pure linseed oil or straight garlic, the analysis is quite different and varies with the individual ingredient.

There is no legal requirement to list energy, starch or sugar unless a claim is made about them and many manufacturers will choose not to list them. In supplements, the concentrated feeding rates mean levels consumed are so small they are not relevant in the overall diet.

The following example helps to highlight this:

A supplement for a pony with laminitis:

* Sugar level in the supplement 15.4%
* Feeding rate 30g / day
* Sugar provided per day 4.62g

At under 5g, the supplement provides less than a teaspoon of sugar daily. Compare that to even a low sugar hay (10% sugar), or grazing, which can easily provide around 1kg (1000g) of sugar daily, or more, at typical intakes.

In a similar way, under Feed Law, values such as Crude Protein are legally required, but are actually not very relevant to supplements. Supplements may have a relatively high protein level, for example from yeasts and probiotics. However due to their concentrated feeding rate at typically less than 100g per day, it won’t significantly impact the overall protein in the diet. If in doubt, check with the manufacturer, but protein levels in concentrated supplements should not be a concern.

**When is a protein not a protein?**

On some supplement labels, particularly those aimed at joint support, you may see a relatively high Crude Protein level. However all is not always as it seems. Crude Protein is measured by assessing the level of nitrogen in a product and applying a conversion calculation. Glucosamine, a commonly used ingredient in joint support, contains nitrogen, so will give a protein reading, but is actually an ‘amino sugar’, a type of carbohydrate, and not protein.

**Ash**

‘Ash’ is another aspect of Analysis that can cause confusion, however don’t worry, manufacturers aren’t putting the leftovers of a bonfire in their products! Ash is simply a term relating to the residue left when a feed material is burnt at high temperature which, effectively, means the minerals. It is a recognised way to measure the mineral content of a feed material. Therefore a high ash product will be high in minerals, and in fact if Ash exceeds 40% it becomes classed as a ‘Mineral feed’.

**Other information included on labels:**

**How to Use**

The label should include feeding instructions, and it’s important to ensure they are adhered to in order to get the full benefit of the product. Some products will advise feeding rate by body weight, particularly those designed to balance the diet with vitamins and minerals. Feeding less than advised will result in the product not being effective, while feeding too much may be wasteful and even potentially harmful in some cases. Targeted supplements designed to support a particular health requirement may advise feeding to the individual’s need rather than body weight, for example ‘loaded rate’ or ‘maintenance rate’. While these feeding instructions may be less strictly linked to body weight, manufacturer’s guidelines should still be followed.

**Traceability Information**

All packaging should include a batch number, best before date, species specification and storage information for safe use and traceability. The manufacturer’s details must also be included to ensure that, should it be necessary, they can be contacted directly.

**Quality Marks**

In addition to the technical information on the product and its use, the label can also tell you a lot more.

Look for quality accreditations that show products are manufactured to a good standard and have undergone independent audits. Those you’re most likely to see are UFAS (Universal Feed Assurance Scheme) in the UK, or, on more global products, GMP+FSA (Good Manufacturing Process + Feed Safety Assurance). For more information on this refer to the section Good Practice in Manufacturing.

**Competition Suitability**

For riders competing in affiliated competitions the suitability of feed, including supplements, for competition is of paramount importance. Companies accredited to the British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) NOPS code are required to evaluate and reduce the risk of NOPS contamination during every step of the manufacturing process from the sourcing, transport and storage of ingredients, right through to production of the finished feed. Participating companies are strictly audited by BETA on an annual basis to ensure compliance. Look for the BETA NOPS logo on labels, and check BETA’s website for accredited companies.

A logo with a horse head

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**Sustainability**

Rightly, green credentials are increasingly important to manufacturers and horse owners alike, and labelling can help here too. Whilst there are still challenges in reducing the use of plastic for the safe packaging of feeds and supplements for horses, we can go a long way by ensuring those we do use are easily recyclable. Look for recycling information on the label, and check the rating to see whether standard roadside collection schemes can be used. If not, most local authority run recycling centres will accept moderate amounts of plastic packaging.