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# Hackney Pony Breed Guide: Characteristics, Health & Nutrition

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**Evidence Based:** This article has 18 scientific references



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The Hackney is an elegant breed of light horses developed in Great Britain for carriage driving. These equines are known for their **high-stepping trots**, which help them stand out in harness show arenas.

Hackneys come in two different height ranges. **Hackney ponies** are shorter than Hackney horses but

share similar characteristics, packing expressive personality and movement into a smaller size. These ponies are more prevalent in North America than their larger cousins.

While most Hackney owners use their horses for **driving disciplines**, Hackney bloodlines have significantly influenced the development of several popular riding horse breeds. Unfortunately, full-size purebred Hackneys are at risk of going extinct.

This article will review the origin, history, breed characteristics, health problems, and nutritional needs of **Hackney horses** and ponies. Keep reading to learn more about caring for and feeding Hackneys.

## Hackney Horse & Pony History

The Hackney breed developed alongside the increased use of **carriages for transportation** in Europe. Eventually, they became prized by equine enthusiasts and aristocrats on both sides of the Atlantic for their elegant looks and animated movement.

### Origin

Hackney horses can trace their ancestry to the **Norfolk Trotters** of Norfolk, England. Nobility kept trotters for transportation as early as the 14th century, but the breed didn't gain significant popularity until the 1700s.

During this century, breeders crossed [Thoroughbred](#) descendants of the Darley [Arabian](#) with native Norfolk Trotters to create refined, spirited carriage horses.

Foaled in 1760, **Shale's Horse** is recognized as the first Hackney horse to resemble the breed standard we know today.

These horses began crossing the Atlantic by the late 1800s, around the same time breeding shifted to achieve a **pony type**. These ponies originated from crossing Hackney horses with small Welsh Ponies.

Sir George, foaled in 1866, is considered the first Hackney Pony. Today, **95% of all Hackneys** registered in North America are ponies.

The Hackney name originates from the term used to distinguish light-riding horses from heavier war horses in Medieval Europe. By the time the **Hackney Stud Book Society** formalized the breeding of Hackneys in 1883, the breed was rarely used as a riding horse. [\[1\]](#)

### Historic Use

**Road improvements** in the late 18th century encouraged the development of faster horses to pull carriages. Until then, humans primarily rode horses for transportation and relied on heavier breeds with the power to haul loads over rough terrain for driving. [\[2\]](#)

The lighter, faster carriage horses became a **status symbol** for wealthy citizens, and breeding programs began focusing on producing horses with more extravagant trotting movements. Many

Hackneys also descended from trotting horses renowned for their speed and stamina.

Hackneys rapidly gained popularity in North America in the late 1800s during the **golden age of driving**. In the United States, breeders emphasized producing smaller Hackney Ponies more than breeders in England. [3]

Demand for Hackney horses declined significantly after the introduction of the automobile. Eventually, these horses found a new calling in the **show arena**, where most Hackney owners enjoy their horses today.

## Breed Registry

The [American Hackney Horse Society](#) (AHHS) is the official breed registry for Hackney horses and ponies in North America. The organization was incorporated in 1891, just nine years after the formalization of the first **Hackney Stud Book** in England.

In addition to maintaining a registry of Hackneys, the AHHS also promotes the breeding, exhibition, and ownership of Hackney horses and Hackney ponies.

## Breed Characteristics

Hackney horses and Hackney ponies share **similar breed characteristics** despite their different heights. All Hackneys have conformations, movements, and temperaments that allow them to excel as driving horses. But these traits may not suit all other disciplines.

## Conformation

Hackney horses are **14.2 to 16 hands** tall, while Hackney ponies stand between **12.2 and 14.2 hands**. All Hackneys have refined appearances, but horses have slightly heavier proportions.

The ideal Hackney has a delicate, well-shaped head with small, alert ears and expressive eyes. These horses have **upright arched necks**, broad chests, and long, sloping shoulders. Compact bodies with muscular backs, level croups, and powerful hindquarters add to their movement.

Hackneys also have a naturally high tail carriage, long forearms and gaskins, strong hocks, broad knees, and fairly upright hooves. **Increased joint flexion** produces the exaggerated knee and hock action that characterizes the breed. [4]

## Colours

Registered Hackneys can be **any solid colour**. Standard [coat colours](#) include bay, brown, black, and chestnut. White leg and face markings are permitted and frequently seen.

## Temperament

Hackneys have **spirited temperaments** that allow them to shine in the show arena. These horses are generally high energy and benefit from regular exercise and proper handling to reduce [behavioural problems](#).

Their sensitivity and intelligence make them quick learners, but these horses may not be suitable for complete beginners without guidance. However, experienced Hackney owners often find these horses **playful and affectionate** equine partners.

## Disciplines

Hackney horses are the **ultimate harness show horse**. Their big trots with exaggerated knee and hock action are ideal for pulling carriages with style, and many owners enjoy driving their Hackneys in breed shows.

Hackney ponies compete in Hackney Pony, Harness Pony, Roadster Pony, and Pleasure Pony divisions while pulling carriages at these shows. Hackneys can also participate in other **driving disciplines**, such as combined driving, and may be shown single, pair, and four in hand.

While Hackneys were developed primarily for driving, these horses can also succeed as **riding horses**. Hackneys and crosses often compete in jumping, [dressage](#), English pleasure, and competitive trail classes.

## Hackney Horse Health

Unlike some horse breeds, Hackney horses don't have a high incidence of genetic disease. However, many of these horses are susceptible to health problems that commonly affect [performance horses](#) with busy competition and training schedules.

## Health Risks of Showing

Hackney horses with active show schedules have an increased risk of health problems associated with **high stress levels**.

Research demonstrates that [transportation](#), stall confinement, and changes in routine associated with showing can **increase stress levels** for horses.

One study found that participating in a single competition can significantly increase **cortisol levels** in horses, producing a physiological stress response. [5]

Elevated cortisol levels are associated with a higher incidence of [gastric ulcers](#). In another study of non-racing performance horses, post-competition gastroscopy diagnosed **gastric ulceration** in 56.5% of horses after one competitive event, compared to 17.4% before. [6]

Hackneys with gastric ulcers may show signs of **increased reactivity**. [7] Owners should consult their veterinarian to determine if behavioural challenges in Hackney ponies are due to an underlying

problem, such as ulcers.

## Common Health Problems

Besides the increased risk of health problems in showing Hackneys, these horses have a reputation as a relatively healthy breed.

However, their high-stepping gaits can strain their musculoskeletal structures and predispose them to **lameness problems** when overtrained. Driving Hackneys perform the same gait for extended periods, which can cause repetitive stress injuries. [8]

Increased **joint flexion** puts more strain on ligaments and tendons. Without adequate recovery time, these horses can develop [soft tissue injuries](#). Overuse of the joints can also lead to degenerative joint conditions such as [osteoarthritis](#). [9]

## Care and Management

Even if your Hackney doesn't show, all horses need quality [basic care](#), including a **veterinary wellness program** with annual [vaccinations](#), [deworming](#), and [dental exams](#).

Performance horses may also benefit from regular [lameness exams](#) to identify problems early.

[Farrier care](#) is critical for Hackney horses to maintain **hoof balance** and prevent excess loading forces on tendons and ligaments from their extravagant movement.

[Regular turnout](#) can help [reduce stress](#) in Hackneys and provides an opportunity for free exercise, which supports [strong bones](#), tendons, ligaments, and healthy joints. Grazing during turnout is also beneficial for preventing [stereotypic behaviours](#) and supporting digestive health. [10]

However, turnout alone may not provide Hackneys with enough exercise. This energetic breed does best with **regular training** to provide mental stimulation. A lack of exercise may make these horses challenging to handle.

## Hackney Nutrition

Nutrition is one of the most important aspects of managing Hackney ponies and horses. A **balanced diet** supports optimal body condition, energy levels and overall well-being.

Your Hackney's diet also plays a significant role in supporting digestive function, joint health, hoof health, coat quality, mood balance and more.

## Weight Maintenance

Hackney horses are typically **average keepers**. Some Hackney ponies are [easy keepers](#), but the breed has a lower incidence of [obesity](#) and metabolic disorders than other pony breeds. [11]

Hackneys share bloodlines with **Thoroughbreds**, who also have a lower incidence of metabolic problems. [11]

The dietary energy your Hackney requires to maintain a healthy [body weight](#) will vary depending on their body size and workload.

Unexplained weight loss in Hackneys is often a [sign of gastric ulcers](#) or another GI problem. Consult your veterinarian if your Hackney struggles to maintain weight on a balanced diet.

## Sample Diet

Forage should be the foundation of every horse's diet. Providing your Hackney pony or horse with **free-choice forage** can help maintain digestive health and reduce the risks of ulcers. [12]

Horses need to consume approximately 2% of their body weight in forage daily. That is equivalent to **20 pounds of hay** on a dry matter basis daily for an average 1000-pound Hackney horse and 15 pounds for an average 750-pound Hackney pony. You can learn more about [how much hay to feed your horse](#) in this article. [13]

The [best type of hay](#) for Hackneys depends on their workload and body condition. Higher-quality grass hays provide more calories for Hackney performance horses, while easy-keeper Hackney ponies may need lower quality mature hay.

The following **example diet** is intended for a mature Hackney pony with normal body condition in **light work**.

Feed	Maintenance Diet
	<b>(Amount / Day)</b>
<b>Mid-Quality hay (10% crude protein)</b>	Free-choice
<b>Salt</b>	30 g (2 tbsps)
<a href="#">Omneity® Pellets</a>	200 g (2 scoops)
<a href="#">w-3 oil</a>	60 ml (2 oz)
Diet Analysis	
<b>Digestible Energy (% of Req)</b>	102%
<b>Protein (% of Req)</b>	142%
<b>NSC (% Diet)</b>	8.8%

The dietary analysis presented above is based on NRC requirements for a mature horse in light work weighing 1,100 lb (500 kg). [18]

Although forage typically provides enough energy for Hackneys in light work, hay-only diets are usually deficient in several key nutrients, including:

- [Vitamin E](#)
- [Zinc](#) and [copper](#)
- [Selenium](#) (depending on geographic location)
- [Sodium](#)

Mad Barn's [Omneity®](#) is a concentrated vitamin and mineral formula that fills these gaps and is a superior alternative to grain-based commercial ration balancers for Hackney ponies and horses. Feeding Omneity® ensures your Hackney receives optimal nutrition for peak performance and overall well-being.



[Learn More](#)

- 100% organic trace minerals
- Complete B-vitamin fortification
- Optimal nutrition balance
- Our best-selling equine vitamin

If your Hackney needs additional sources of calories to meet energy demands, consider adding [fat supplements](#) to the diet. Fat is a **safer alternative** to high-starch feeds for horses at risk of gut health problems. [14]

In this diet, Mad Barn's [w-3 oil](#) is added to meet caloric needs and provide anti-inflammatory DHA from microalgae. This beneficial omega-3 fatty acid is not found in plant oils such as [camelina oil](#) or [canola oil](#).



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## Feeding Recommendations

[Fresh water](#) and **plain loose salt** should always be available to Hackney ponies and horses. Many Hackneys do not voluntarily consume enough salt to meet their sodium requirements, so our nutritionists recommend [adding 1 – 2 ounces of salt](#) to their daily ration.

Feeding hay in a **slow feeder** can benefit Hackneys by ensuring constant access to free-choice forage while slowing consumption to prevent weight gain. Constant access to forage is associated with a reduced risk of digestive problems, such as gastric ulcers.

[Alfalfa hay](#) is an excellent **high-protein forage** for performance Hackneys that need additional protein sources in their diet. The high calcium content of Alfalfa hay is also beneficial for buffering stomach acid and preventing ulcers. However, feeding too much alfalfa can create imbalances in the diet and increase the risk of [enteroliths](#). [15]

Limiting starch in the diet can help prevent digestive health concerns in Hackney horses. Research shows that large volumes of **high-starch feed** can cause digestive upset. Consider splitting the ration into multiple small meals if you feed grain. [16]

## Nutritional Supplements

Fat sources with high levels of [omega-3 fatty acids](#) can help support **joint health** and maintain healthy regulation of inflammation in Hackney ponies and horses. These fats also promote shiny coats that help show horses stand out in the arena. [17]

Mad Barn's [W-3 Oil](#) is a fat supplement that provides the omega-3 essential fatty acid DHA, along with high levels of natural Vitamin E. Together, these nutrients support connective tissue, muscle function, immune defenses and overall well-being in exercising horses.



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[MSM](#) is another equine supplement that is popular among Hackney ponies because it supports joint health and post-exercise care. This natural supplement provides a bioavailable source of sulphur, a vital component of glucosamine and collagen.



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For Hackney ponies at high risk of gut issues, Mad Barn's [Visceral+](#) is a veterinarian-recommended formula to help maintain **stomach and hindgut health**. This comprehensive supplement supplement contains probiotics, yeast, herbs, amino acids, and minerals to keep show horses performing at their best.



### [Learn More](#)

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Working with an **equine nutritionist** can help ensure your Hackney's diet is optimized health and performance. Book a free [nutrition consultation](#) for personalized guidance on your horse's feeding program from our team of expert nutritionists.

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