Salt in Horses

Providing salt
As it gets closer to summer, it's important to ensure horses are getting enough salt as they lose substantial quantities of electrolytes through sweating. Hay alone cannot supply a horse's salt needs, as some forage is quite low in sodium. Overall, the diet of the horse should contain between 0.25-0.5% salt. For an 1100 lb horse that means it should consume 25-50 g of salt per day. Many horses also receive a concentrate in addition to the forage they are eating. Typically, most horse feeds are formulated to contain between 0.5 and 1% salt. This increased concentration of salt in the feed is based on the knowledge that most horses will be consuming less grain than hay. However, the tricky part is that the salt concentration is typically not listed on the feed tag, so you really don't know how much it is supplying. Therefore, to be safe, you should supply your horse with some sort of salt source in addition to his feed. If you look at most feeding guidelines for equine feeds it is stated to supply your horse with salt on a daily basis.

The easiest way to meet the horse's needs is to supply a salt block. Researchers have shown that on average horses willingly consume about 50 g from a salt block per day. However, the variability in intake is high. Individual horses may range between 9-143 g of salt per day! Therefore, some horses will eat too much, while others not enough. Even the same horse may alter his intake of salt quite a bit from day to day. If you really like projects, and have a sensitive scale at home, you could determine your horse's average salt intake per day (if he is kept alone with his block) by weighing it every day. Also, some horses just won't eat their block. If your salt block shows no evidence of licking and is covered with dust, you have a non-licker. Alternatively, you could try to provide loose salt, which some horses prefer or specifically feed salt to your horse. So how much salt should you provide your horse per day, especially if he is a non-salt block licker? For your maintenance horse, that would be about 1 oz. which is 28 grams. If you prefer to use your teaspoons to measure instead, one teaspoon contains 6 g of salt. So your horse would need 4 teaspoons of salt per day.

Exercising horses
A horse in heavy work requires about twice that of horse which isn't worked, or about 50 grams of salt per day. However, for those intensely working in hot climates, some researchers have indicated their need for electrolytes may increase 9 fold. Now remember, these are horses at a high level of work, such as race horses, three day eventers etc. Obviously for the exercising horse in hot climates, they may not be able or willing to consume that much via their salt block, which is why it is important to consider supplementing your horse. If you are supplementing your horse with table salt, you would increase that amount from maintenance to 2 oz or 8 teaspoons (2 2/3 tablespoons), with an increase to 3 oz or 12 teaspoons (4 T.) in hot climates. There are also many commercially available electrolytes as well which can be added to water or provided in a paste form.

Getting the water back in
Typically if you need to provide a horse with electrolytes, you should also be concerned with rehydrating the horse. Oddly enough, the horse's own system can work against it. As the sweat of horses is so much more hypertonic (or contains more solutes) than its plasma, when horses sweat heavily, their blood becomes hypotonic. This does not provide the normal stimulus to drink that having a higher electrolyte concentration in the blood does. Therefore, even if offered water, they may not drink. Providing electrolyte pastes or saline solution after exercise may cause the horse to restore his water balance and recover more quickly. However, do not just offer a horse a salt water solutions if they have not been trained to drink it. This will result in water refusal and only exacerbate the problem. They should also be offered a choice of non-saline water to ensure that they replenish the water they have lost. In addition,
horses seem to prefer tepid water to ice water when given a choice. So remember, it is as imperative that the horse is also restoring his water balance after exercise as it is to provide electrolytes.