

Equine Nutrition; A piece of the whole horse puzzle

Myths & Facts Your Horse Wants you to Know

By Lisa Ross-Williams



Far too many horses live with inappropriate diets due to long-term myths surrounding equine nutrition. In fact, a horse can't meet his full potential in any aspect without the correct nutrients in proper balance. It's my hope this piece will empower you to start asking questions and seek out further information on equine nutrition.

Feeding practices

Myth: *Feeding twice a day is fine for my horse.*

Fact: Infrequent feeding is detrimental to horses both physically and mentally. Horses are natural foragers and designed to eat many small meals throughout the day. Their stomach is small, holding only 1 to 4 gallons of food which moves out very quickly; within an hour. By only eating twice a day, your horse is feeling hungry 20 hours a day which contributes to stress; his intestinal bacteria becomes unbalanced =colic and loose stools; and he's at a higher risk of ulcers. Divide your horse's daily grass hay, (approx 2% of body weight) into multiple feedings or better yet, offer free-choice grass hay.

Myth: *Feeding in raised feeders is healthier for my horse.*

Fact: It's not only important what we feed our horses but how. Horses are designed to eat off the ground which is evident in the fact that lower jaw slides forward into proper grinding position. Eating from shoulder high feeders results in improperly chewed food, uneven tooth wear, decreased saliva, and respiratory issues from dust and hay pieces.

Myth: *Feeding straight alfalfa is fine for horses; we've been doing it for years.*

Fact: This far too common practice is detrimental to horses. There is a major difference between legumes like alfalfa and clover and grasses such as bermuda, timothy, orchard or native grasses. This is why it's important to use grasses free-choice while limiting the amount of alfalfa. Why is this? Alfalfa can have 50% or more calories and protein, has a high Calcium to Phosphorus ratio, and is linked to intestinal stones. Today's alfalfa is "super" concentrated and developed for dairy cows rather than horses. But alfalfa is not an evil hay when used correctly 15-20% of overall hay amount as its high in trace minerals, is considered a blood cleansing herb and the high alkalinity can benefit ulcers.

Myth: *My horse is getting everything he needs from the hay.*

Fact: In an ideal world, the pasture and hay would be grown in fertile organic soil, but this is rarely true. So if the soil is barren, semi-depleted or bombarded with chemical fertilizers, the plants will be lacking and so will our horses. This is why most horses need supplementation. Far too many horses are deficient in the key nutrients including the Omega 3 fatty acids, vitamin E and selenium, and often magnesium and copper.

Detrimental Starches and Sugars

Myth: *Sweet feed, grain and concentrated feeds are a healthy diet for horses.*

Fact: Traditionally horses have been fed high sugar/starch feeds such as grains, molasses and sweet feeds but recent research shows this practice is detrimental. While a low starch/sugar diet is extremely important for easy-keeper breeds, a “better safe than sorry” approach may be appropriate for most horses. Ingredients which contribute to high levels of starch and sugar in feeds include grains and molasses and they can wreck havoc on a horse’s glucose levels. The surge of glucose causes a quick release of insulin and a rush of adrenaline, which results in fatigue lasting several hours. With Insulin Resistance, the easy-keepers cannot tolerate these up and down levels and eventually their bodies stop processing the glucose properly. Instead of high sugar/starch feedstuffs, try rice bran and flaxseed which have a low glycemic index.

Myth: *I’m feeding Timothy grass hay so high nsc (non-structural carbs) are not a danger.*

Fact: Pasture and hays can have high levels of nsc (sugar and starch). Cool season grasses such as Timothy, Brome, Orchard and Fescue are normally higher in nsc than warm season such as Bermuda or native grasses. Stressed plants are also higher; drought, soil imbalance or temperature changes. For more info about starches and sugars in feeds, visit www.safergrass.org

Myth: *My horse isn’t fat and doesn’t have a metabolic issue, so I don’t have to worry about sugars and starches.*

Fact: Some horses are born with the “thrifty” gene, the hardy breeds, which predisposes them to metabolic issues. This is similar to type 2 diabetes in people which comes on later in life. Each high starch/sugar meal pushes him closer to the start of this condition.

Reading the Labels

Myth: *They wouldn’t put 2nd rate ingredients and filler in big name brand feeds.*

Fact: Oh yes, they would. You must read the ingredients on feed labels and be on the lookout for these ingredients: Wheat Middlings, Soybean or Oat Hulls, Artificial

Flavorings (Undisclosed synthetic material which are not overseen by the USDA), Alfalfa Meal or Bermuda Straw (often made from poor quality and older hay) and By-Products:

Myth: *Comparing guaranteed analysis is too confusing; you need a math degree to figure it out.*

Fact: By learning to convert various units of measure, it's easy to compare. Also knowing some key ratios to shoot for is invaluable. Here are some:

- Calcium:Phosphorus:Magnesium 2:1:1
- Copper:Zinc:Manganese 1:3:3
- Copper:Iron 1:6

Now, do you have more questions? Want to be empowered to make informed decisions regarding your horse's diet? The information is there-Enjoy the Journey of Learning.
www.naturalhorsetalk.com

Lisa Ross-Williams is a natural horse care consultant, clinician and host of the "If Your Horse Could Talk" webcast available at www.naturalhorsetalk.com. She is a seasoned writer and former Senior Editor of Equine Wellness Magazine. Along with her husband, Kenny, they share their small Arizona ranch with their beloved animals.

Lisa has dedicated herself to extensive research, as well as an exploration of hands-on experiences which included clinics, seminars and courses covering natural horsemanship, hoof care, dentistry, bodywork, homeopathy, iridology, essential oils and nutrition. Since then, she has earned her degree in Environmental Plant Science and has completed the Basic Homeopathy Veterinary course through the British Institute of Homeopathy.

Known to colleagues and friends as one who "walks her talk," Lisa has positively influenced thousands of horse owners and grateful horses, sharing her knowledge of natural and holistic horse care.



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