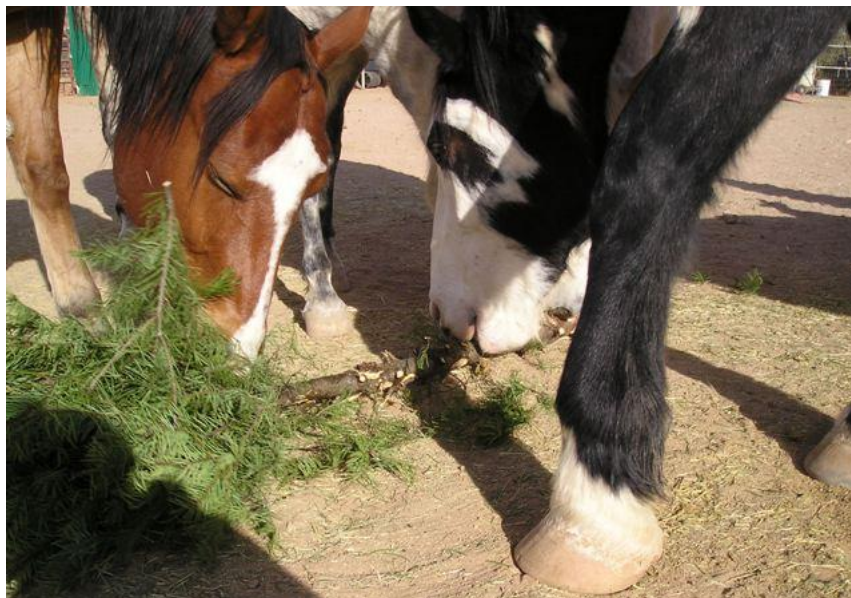


Feeding Naturally

Feeding Naturally

by Lisa Ross-Williams

We've all heard the old adage, "You are what you eat". But does that apply to our horses? In fact, equine nutrition plays a crucial role if you want a happy, healthy horse. Unfortunately, it's still lacking for far too many. Many horses have had their fundamental eating habits changed either because of lack of knowledge or human convenience. By getting



back to a more natural feeding program, you can give your horse a new lease on life and allow her to reach her full potential.

Infrequent feeding is unhealthy

A horse's digestive system needs small quantities of food numerous times daily. This is because his relatively small stomach can hold only one to four gallons of food at a time. This food moves into the gut track very quickly so horse feels hungry again about an hour after eating. Infrequent feeding can unbalance his intestinal bacteria, resulting in stomach disturbances, diarrhea, and colic. It can also contribute to gastric ulcer disease, estimated to afflict 60% to 90% of mature horses.

Ulcers occur when stomach tissue is damaged by digestive acids. Because a horse is meant to graze on an almost continual basis, his stomach constantly produces digestive acid for the breakdown of food. When there is food in the stomach, the acid is properly absorbed and neutralized. Allowing your horse free access to pasture or grass hay, while cutting down on grain and concentrated processed feeds, lowers his risk of developing ulcer disease. It also re-establishes a more natural feeding pattern and wakes up his foraging instinct.

What is a natural diet for horses?

There's more to feeding a horse than offering free-choice hay, as not all hay is created equal

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when it comes to equine health. Different types of grass hay, such as Bermuda, Timothy, Orchard, Brome and Rye, along with *small* amounts of alfalfa or grain hay, give your horse a variety of textures, tastes and nutrients.

When feeding your horse on a free-choice basis, grass hays should comprise the main course, with legume hays like alfalfa serving as a condiment only. One reason for this is that alfalfa can contain 50% more calories and protein per pound than grass hay. People often make the mistake of feeding alfalfa hay in the same quantities as grass hay, or worse yet, as the only feed. No horse needs this much protein or calories. In addition, alfalfa has a high calcium to phosphorus ratio -- often 4:1 and higher. The ratio for a healthy horse is 2:1.

Furthermore, a University of California study confirms that too much alfalfa may lead to a higher risk of enteroliths. These rock-hard mineral deposits, also known as stones, build up in the stomach or intestine and can cause colic and death. The study revealed that horses suffering from stones had a higher pH concentrate in their colons, and more alfalfa in their diets.

Too much grain can also cause health disorders. In the wild, a horse finds grain in only small scattered amounts, often when winter is approaching and the horse needs more calories. It is neither natural nor healthy for a horse to consume large amounts of this highly concentrated foodstuff, which can cause vices, colic, ulcers and high insulin levels if overfed.

Detrimental sugar and starch

Traditionally in the past, horses have been fed high starch/sugar diets, but recent research shows this practice has detrimental affects. 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. These 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 alternatives such as rice bran, wheat bran and beet pulp.



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You should also consider the types of hay and pasture your horse eats, as some are naturally higher in sugars than others. Cool season grasses such as Timothy, Brome, Orchard and Fescue are normally higher than warm season varieties such as Bermuda and native prairie grasses. Grain hays fall into the dangerous category while alfalfa can have low to moderate sugar levels. Stressed plants (often affected by drought), nutrient imbalance and temperature changes have higher sugar levels as well.

Tip The safest time to graze horses at risk for glucose imbalances is from 3 am-10 am and on cloudy days.

The importance of mineral balance

Left to their own devices, horses are incredibly intuitive about what their bodies need. I once witnessed an amazing gray use his powerful natural hooves to dig into a bank on the range. Inch by inch he worked until he uncovered what he was looking for -- a reddish rock that he began to lick. Although there were many other rocks around, that particular one contained the specific minerals his body craved..

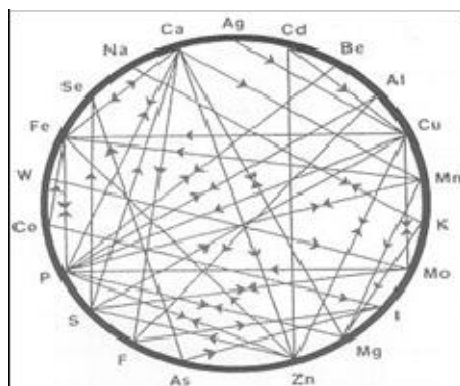


Diagram 1: Arrow denotes interference between minerals. For example, Calcium absorption decreases manganese.

Horses need a correct balance of minerals for energy production, fluid balance, normal growth, bone formation, healing, and the proper functioning of cells. Imbalances can cause a variety of disorders including skin and hoof conditions, allergies, poor stress tolerance, low immune reserves and intestinal problems. Stress, environmental toxins, unbalanced feeding programs and genetic patterns can all contribute to mineral imbalances.

A Hair Mineral Analysis, when done by a qualified practitioner, is a very effective tool for pinpointing mineral imbalances. From a sample of your horse's mane, an HMA can reveal mineral excesses, deficiencies, key ratios, and levels of toxic substances such as aluminum, lead, mercury, arsenic, and cadmium. These imbalances can then be corrected through proper supplementation..

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The facts on flax

Adding ground flaxseed to a horse's diet can strengthen the immune system, enhance mineral absorption, help chronic inflammatory conditions, improve hair, skin and hoof conditions, and may even alleviate allergies. Flax can help prevent sand colic because it's a soluble fiber source that forms a gel to trap, suspend and carry sand out of the body. It's also high in Omega-3 fatty acids, a nutrient lacking in most horses that are fed only hay instead of pasture.

Variety is the spice of life

Horses rarely choose to eat only hay or grass and in fact, derive needed nutrients from a variety of natural plant materials. They will nibble on leaves, bark and seeds, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables.

Providing branches from a variety of trees not only lets your horse nibble leaves and bark for nutrients, but also gives him a chance to use his teeth naturally, helping to wear down sharp edges. You can offer many types of trees, although you may wish to start with fruit, citrus and pines. Check with your local county extension office about whether or not a particular tree might be poisonous, and also ensure the tree is free of large thorns and pesticides. Natural logs with bark can be obtained from specialized lumber yards, often free of charge from their scrap pile. Be sure to use only natural logs and branches, and avoid lumber or wood that splinters or has been treated.

Common foods that add variety

Zucchini and other squash
Citrus
Melons
Alfalfa & bean sprouts
Pumpkin
Avocados

Horses will also enjoy fresh vegetable scraps along with edible flowers and leaves. Many will even like the tangy taste of citrus fruit. You can sprout bird seed and offer that as a treat, or try the sprouted seed mixes available in grocery stores. Organic carrots grown in your own garden will always be a hit!



On the level

How you feed your horse is as important as what and how often you feed him. Because humans don't want to eat off the ground, we assume horses don't either, so we install chest-level hay racks and mangers. However, a horse is built to chew and swallow with his head at ground level. Eating with his head raised leads to improperly chewed food, decreased saliva, and uneven tooth wear, and also increases the possibility of choking or partial obstruction.

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Respiratory problems can occur because foreign particles are easily inhaled, causing irritation and possible infection. If you are wary of ground level feeding because you're concerned about sand colic, use rubber mats or tire feeders, and supplement with flax seed.

Although equine nutrition is a complex subject that should be geared towards the needs of the individual horse, implementing a natural feeding program will go a long way towards ensuring a happy, healthy life.

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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