



## Feeding Your Equine Companion

By Marcia DuBois, DVM

If you want to have some fun and raise some hackles at the same time, just mention horse-feeding practices to a group of equine enthusiasts. I doubt there is anything else that can stir a seemingly sane group of people to into frenzy faster than questioning their method of horse feeding. As with everything that I do, I try to stay flexible in my thinking on this topic. What works for one horse will not necessarily work for another. Diet is a very individual thing and should adapted for the individual needs of each horse. What benefit the horse obtains from it's diet depends on numerous factors; age, activity level, breed, constitutional makeup, dental health, gut health, parasite status, just to name a few.

We all agree that horses were designed by nature to consume large amounts of high fiber roughage spread over the entire day. They should be walking and eating at most times. With our current management practices, this is seldom the case. If your horse has access to pasture, he might be meeting the ideal more than a horse that is confined to a stall for most of the day. Either way, hay should compromise the lion's share of the diet. How much depends on your individual horse. All grass hay is not created equal; they vary tremendously in nutrient content. As more horses are being recognized having carbohydrate intolerance, more careful examination of our forage choices needs to occur. If you have a horse that is chronically foundered, you need to seriously reevaluate the hay you are feeding and the pasture your horse is grazing. Much of the hay fed today was actually developed to obtain maximum production from dairy cattle. It is much richer in carbohydrates than the equine gut was designed to handle. To get more information on this topic, go to [www.safergrass.org](http://www.safergrass.org).

Sweet feeds and processed grain products are probably being over fed in the assumption that the higher calories are being converted to usable energy. These rations tend to pass quickly through the stomach and foregut without being properly digested. When these starches are reduced to lactic acid in the hindgut, the balance of the beneficial bacteria in the gut is negatively impacted. Bacteria die off releasing toxins, which absorbed into the blood stream causing colic and founder. If you are going to use these feeds, use them sparingly, buy from reputable sources,

be sure the product you use has at least 12% highly digestible fiber such as beet pulp, soybean hulls or alfalfa. Horses with insulin resistance, Cushing's, or hypothyroidism should never receive sweet feeds.

Fat sources are probably underfed to horses. High quality fats such as flax, coconut oil and soybean oil are good ways to add calories and energy to your horses diet. This is especially true in our equine athletes. If your horse is in performance and burning large amounts of calories adding fat to the diet will provide sustainable energy without the sugar rush and associated behavioral problems that often accompanies an increase in sweet feeds and grain to the diet.

No matter what you feed, if the horse lacks a healthy gut, he will derive less nutritional value from the feed. The teeth play a huge role in the horse's ability to digest their diet. If chewing does not properly break down the food, it will pass undigested through the gastrointestinal tract. Antibiotic therapy, anti-inflammatories, vaccinations, deworming, stress, and age, etc., all take a toll on the normal bacteria of the gastrointestinal tract. A healthy population of beneficial bacteria is essential for proper equine digestion. Probiotics are replacement bacteria. It is a good idea to periodically treat your horse with probiotics, Fast Track and Probios are some of the most common brands. Prebiotics nourish the intestinal mucosa and provide food for the probiotics. Glutamine is a common example as is *Equipride* [emphasis added]. Pre and probiotics are one of the easiest ways to be sure that you horse is getting the most from his diet.

Giving horses supplements is a great idea. Much of the hay that is grown is grown on depleted soils treated with chemical fertilizers. Vitamin and mineral deficiencies are more common than most people realize. When choosing a supplement chose one that is made from whole food sources, not produced chemically in a lab. The blue green algae and Maca are excellent whole food nutrition sources.

In conclusion, there is no perfectly formulated diet that is right for all horses. When considering diet one must take into account the horse's: constitution, age, job, health, and lifestyle.

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