

Common Myths in Feeding Horses
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Research in equine nutrition has gained a host of new insights over the past 20 years. Improvements in feed manufacturing and science-based knowledge of equine nutrition continue to expand. However, many myths and “old-school” ways of thinking are still floating around the horse world. Some of these common misconceptions will be addressed here.

Myth #1 - Bran mashes function as a laxative:

Facts: Warm bran mashes are often fed to horses in an effort to ward off colic. In fact, it has been shown that bran does not produce a laxative effect. It does not add water to the stool, and consequently does not soften the feces. Often, horse owners might observe a loose stool after feeding a weekly bran mash. This is likely due to the sudden change in diet and addition of a feedstuff the digestive tract is not used to. Bran also has a reversed calcium-to-phosphorus ratio, so its regular inclusion in the diet may require supplementation with an appropriate amount of calcium or good-quality legume hay.

Myth #2 - Excessive protein makes a horse grow too fast and causes DOD:

Facts: The main causes for DOD (developmental orthopedic disease) are excessive energy intake, mineral imbalances and genetics. Excessive protein intake does not appear to negatively affect bone development in growing horses. Overfeeding of protein will result in greater ammonia excretion in the urine, hence a stronger smell in the barn and potential airway irritation if ventilation is inadequate. Appropriate exercise should also be considered for proper skeletal development, along with a balanced ration. KNG products such as Sentinel SafeStart, Dynasty Junior and Vintage Mare & Foal are properly balanced to meet the needs of both the lactating mare and the growing foal.

Myth #3 - Unprocessed grains are more wholesome and natural for the horse:

Facts: In an effort to provide horses with a holistic diet, some horse owners have been misinformed that “processed” horse feeds are bad, along the lines of processed human food (frozen dinners, cheese-in-a-can, etc.). In fact, ingredients in horse feeds are processed in an effort to make them more digestible and the nutrients more bioavailable. Grain processing is a long-held practice designed to garner optimum nutrition and energy value from feedstuffs. Vitamin and mineral mixes are added to fortify and balance processed grain concentrates. Whole corn and barley are essentially nutritionally useless to the horse, and must be processed (cracked, steam flaked, rolled, extruded, ground) for digestive enzymes and microbes to extract energy and nutrition. Oats are the only grain that appears nutritionally valuable processed or unprocessed. KNG products like Sunshine Plus, Min-A-Vite Lite, Equine Choice Topline 12 or Topline 32 can help balance straight grain-only diets by providing a highly fortified vitamin/mineral pellet at a low feeding rate.

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Myth #4 - Beet pulp, if fed dry, will expand and cause choke or stomach rupture:

Facts: Soaking beet pulp helps get water into the horse, and may help reduce the risk of choke. Out of personal preference, the author always recommends soaking. However, note that saliva isn’t absorbed into dry beet pulp fast enough to cause expansion in the esophagus to cause choke. Because particle size is small, horses that don’t chew properly or who bolt their feed (eat too quickly) may be at greater risk of choke if beet pulp is consumed dry. In addition, remember that a horse’s stomach can hold 8-17 quarts (2-4 gallons), depending on his size. This is roughly equivalent to 4.5-9.5 pounds of dry beet pulp, which is up to 7-9 times more than one typically feeds at once. Therefore, dry beet pulp is unlikely to cause stomach rupture.

Myth #5 - A high-fiber grain concentrate means it is a “complete” feed:

Facts: While complete feeds contain high amounts of guaranteed crude fiber, a high-fiber feed product does not automatically mean it is complete. A complete feed is designed to provide all the nutrition a horse needs without the addition of anything else, including hay. A complete feed will be labeled as such. If one feeds a complete feed, providing quality hay or long-stem forage is still encouraged unless the horse cannot physically consume it. Complete feeds often benefit horses that travel frequently, horses that have access only to poor-quality forage and horses with compromised dentition. KNG offers two complete formulas, Blue Seal Trotter and Dynasty Pride.

Myth #6 - More supplements are better:

Facts: It is possible to do too much of a good thing. If a horse is being fed a grain ration that follows the manufacturer’s recommendations along with good-quality hay, vitamin/mineral supplements are often unnecessary. Horses, who are aged, are in heavy work or who travel frequently may benefit from some additional supplementation. Owners who have a “chemistry set” in the feed room where they are mixing multiple additives in their horses’ rations are at risk for over-supplementation. If minerals become out of balance, they can interfere with each other’s absorption, negatively impacting the nutritional status of the horse. Toxicosis of certain vitamins and minerals is also a potential risk with over-supplementation, and therefore a careful balance is essential. If vitamin/mineral status is a concern, KNG’s ration balancers will help replace deficits in the ration. These include Sunshine Plus, Min-A-Vite Lite, Topline 12 or Topline 32.

Myth #7 - Starch and carbohydrates are bad for the horse:

Facts: Carbohydrates are the main source of energy in equine diets. Remember that horses evolved eating carbohydrates and starch in the form of small amounts of forage, consumed throughout the course of the day. Carbohydrates are the primary energy source for red blood cell and brain function. Glucose is the primary carbohydrate used for ATP (energy) production, and is essential for work. Consumed carbohydrates that are not readily utilized by the horse are stored in the muscle or liver as glycogen. Glycogen is utilized when exercise load increases and stores must be replenished as part of exercise recovery. True, excess carbohydrate consumption can contribute to obesity, laminitis and/or insulin resistance, but these situations are usually extreme cases where too much energy is being fed and sufficient exercise is lacking. Certain metabolic conditions, such as equine Cushing’s syndrome, insulin resistance and polysaccharide storage myopathy (PSSM), dictate a low-carbohydrate diet, however. Overall, a balanced diet is essential and carbohydrate overload should be avoided. The entire Sentinel line of feed is formulated with a controlled starch release and low total starch and sugar content. Blue Seal CarbGuard is one of the lowest starch and sugar products on the market and Dynasty Secure is also formulated with elevated fiber and low starch and sugar.

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Myth #8 - Feeding straight grains, such as corn, oats or barley, are all the horse needs for additional energy:

Facts: Feeding straight grains is an acceptable way to provide energy to a horse; however, it must be done with proper supplementation to balance the diet. ALL grains have reversed calcium-to-phosphorus ratios. Over time, this can lead to DOD in growing horses, or “big head” syndrome in adults. Horses on straight grain diets likely need at least a calcium supplement to properly balance the high-phosphorus intake. Horses on straight grains may also benefit from legume hays, such as alfalfa, which typically have higher calcium content. Hay analysis, and hay type, is critical as well. In this way, a full picture of the diet can be analyzed for a balanced ration. KNG’s ration balancers will help replace deficits in the ration, including Sunshine Plus, Min-A-Vite Lite, Topline 12 or Topline 32.

References:

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