“Pastures best for horses are native pastures such as kangaroo grass and wallaby grass, wheat grass, spear grass, windmill grass and weeping grass.”

We all need a reminder of what horses are designed to eat. If we go back to where they originated, they were adapted to sparse, rugged rangelands with fibrous roughage, including grasses and browse (i.e. trees and shrubs). Their natural diet was very high in fibre, with a little protein and a little fat. Therefore, forage is the key ingredient in a horse’s diet. From this forage, digestive enzymes and a complex mixture of microbes in the gut digest, ferment and manufacture vitamins, volatile fatty acids, glucose and amino acids. Food for survival. The reality is, horses are designed to eat roughage constantly, in small amounts all the time.

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Hold the sugar!

Horses need high-fibre feed constantly to keep their system healthy. This is when to introduce loop paddocks or laneways to limit the intake of unsuitable pasture and keep horses moving as they should.

Many horse owners face the challenge of living where the pasture is too rich for horses. This can lead to any number of problems, especially in the hooves, ranging from tenderness under saddle to mechanical breakdown with white line separation or seedy toe, and serious pathologies such as laminitis. These conditions are not normal for horses and it is important to revisit their housing to prevent such manmade pathologies. Horses need high-fibre feed constantly to keep their system healthy. This is when to introduce loop paddocks or laneways to limit the intake of unsuitable pasture and keep horses moving as they should.

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nutrition. Do not necessarily rely on feed store merchants, feed company reps or the racehorse trainer next door for advice. Owners need to know a little about selecting the right feed for their horses. We all know that humans who live unhealthy lifestyles, including lack of exercise and too much processed, sugary, carbohydrate-loaded foods, are more likely to get diabetes, cancer or heart problems. The same is happening in the equine world: horses are getting more obese, becoming insulin resistant (similar to type 2 diabetes), and early onset or false reading Cushing’s disease is more prevalent. We are creating this, it is manmade. It’s time for owners to take responsibility and right the wrong.

**THE CORRECT FODDER**

When plants grow in their optimum environment, they do not become stressed. Stressed plants (from overgrazing, low moisture content or frost) and weeds or opportunistic plants are higher in sugar, as are improved species for primary production. When managing the grazing of small paddocks, owners must watch for selective grazing and identify and remove weeds. The number one thing to avoid in horse pastures is ryegrass, along with improved clover species. These were planted to remove weeds. The number one thing to watch for selective grazing and identify and remove weeds. The number one thing to avoid in horse pastures is ryegrass, along with improved clover species. These were planted to remove weeds. The number one thing to watch for selective grazing and identify and remove weeds. The number one thing to avoid in horse pastures is ryegrass, along with improved clover species. These were planted to remove weeds. The number one thing to watch for selective grazing and identify and remove weeds. The number one thing to avoid in horse pastures is ryegrass, along with improved clover species. These were planted to remove weeds. The number one thing to watch for selective grazing and identify and remove weeds. The number one thing to avoid in horse pastures is ryegrass, along with improved clover species. These were planted to remove weeds. The number one thing to watch for selective grazing and identify and remove weeds. The number one thing to avoid in horse pastures is ryegrass, along with improved clover species. These were planted to remove weeds. The number one thing to watch for selective grazing and identify and remove weeds. The number one thing to avoid in horse pastures is ryegrass, along with improved clover species. These were planted to remove weeds. The number one thing to watch for selective grazing and identify and remove weeds.

**DIGESTING THE FACTS**

Let’s go back to basics and look at the equid’s digestive system to understand just how important it is for horses to have a constant supply of high-fibre roughage. Not all horses are the same, but their physiology is. A horse’s stomach capacity is very small (9-15 litres) in relation to its body mass, and if we look closely at the structure and function of the stomach, it is meant to be only be half full, from 4.75 litres. Therefore, when we hard-feed a horse - and allow for fluids and contents already present - we can only feed a maximum 3-4 litres. At our rehab centre, miniatures receive no more than 2 litres of hard feed in one feed and heavy breeds no more than 8 litres.

Horses have large molar teeth for grinding fibrous feeds. Whilst they are chewing, bicarbonate is released with the saliva to help buffer their digestive system, as a horse’s stomach produces acid continuously. This brings us to the matter of starvation. If a horse goes without any food in their stomach for longer than three hours, the excess acid can cause ulceration, not to mention issues such as death of gut microbes, toxic reactions, laminitis, scouring, and even behavioural problems due to the pain and stress. Don’t ever starve a horse.

The constant intake of fibre keeps the system working to optimum function. When the digestive system is full, acidity is reduced and digestive processes are slowed, making digestion more efficient and, most importantly, blood sugar and insulin levels are kept at a stable level. High-fibre feed moves through the digestive system slower than processed pellets, giving more time for uptake of nutrients.

**PENCHANT FOR PELLETS**

If it is high-fibre roughage that horses need, why do people turn to pelleted or processed feeds? Is it the ease of feeding, all mixed and ready to go? Well-made fresh pellets can be handy, but highly processed feeds such as pellets are potentially damaging. Most pellet premixes are grain based, and if fed in large amounts horses can receive a massive starch/sugar overload. If this does not cause an acute laminitic attack, then it will likely lead to a chronic state of sub-clinical laminitis and, just like type 2 diabetes in humans, the horse will eventually become insulin resistant. Also, the grain in the pellets is cracked and processed, therefore as it ages it becomes less nutritious and potentially damaging as lots and oils oxidise and turn into free radicals that cause toxic reactions and inflammation.

The higher the fat content of the pellet/grain the more susceptible it is to becoming rancid. Also, if the moisture content is too high, the pellets are subject to mould or bacterial growth. Even when stored in a cool, dry and dark place, pellets are subject to mould or bacterial growth. Therefore, when we hard-feed a horse – and allow for fluids and contents already present – we can only feed a maximum 3-4 litres. At our rehab centre, miniatures receive no more than 2 litres of hard feed in one feed and heavy breeds no more than 8 litres. Horses in a large loop system.

**Slow feeder hay nets are a good choice in dry lot situations when there is little or no ground cover.**

**Horses in a large loop system.**
“Oats are the most natural and safest grain for a horse as they have a high roughage content and encourage salivation and chewing.”

**HARD-FEED FIBRE ALTERNATIVES**

There are other low sugar alternatives to chaff that can be fed in a hard feed to mix in supplements. I call these “by-product feeds” as they are by-products from the harvesting or manufacture of other food.

- Sugar beet pulp is approximately 10% protein, 1% fat and 12% NSC; good for older horses still in work but overweight, as it is high in energy and low in fat.
- Copra is approximately 21% protein, 10% fat and 11% NSC; good for horses that are insulin sensitive but need to develop more top line and muscle.
- Soy hulls are approximately 11% protein, 3% fat and 6% NSC and the highest in fibre. As the evolved horse’s diet is approximately 8% protein, 4-6% fat and 12% NSC, this is the closest to the evolved diet of a horse with a lower sugar amount and my preference as a bulk additive to a hard feed.
- All three by-products need to be soaked just prior to feeding in at least four times the measure of water - i.e., one cup to four cups of water. I am cautious and do not overfeed these by-products; generally, a total of 1.3 cups per feed is the maximum. When it comes to hard feeds, I revert to my grandfather’s saying: “A little bit of everything in moderation is better than a large amount of just one thing.”

**HOLD THE TREATS**

The giving of treats really needs to be brought to every horse owner’s attention. Apples, carrots, sugar cubes, biscuits, plums, bread, bananas, you name it! People love giving treats to their horses. The argument is often “oh, they hardly get any, it should be OK” — far less risky! How many horses that receive treats get cranky when the owner does not bring one! Has anyone been bitten? If you must feed your horse’s “emotion”, a safer alternative is lucerne chaff, a piece of lucerne cube, a millet thistle or grass weed out of the garden.