

Feeding a horse correctly

Feeding your horse well is an important part of managing its diet. This involves understanding its needs, choosing its feed and establishing the appropriate ration according to the type of horse and its activity. It is important to take horses' feeding behaviour into account in natural living conditions, as this will affect its health, particularly when it is living in a stall.

by **Laetitia MARNAY-LE MASNE** | 05.12.2016 |

Translated from french by : Alison Drummond

Technical level   



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Understanding and respecting your horse's diet and needs

Horses are **herbivores** and spend an **average of 15-16 hours a day** feeding in the wild, in the form of multiple small meals, day and night. See digestion.

- **Its digestive system** is adapted to this mode of feeding. This particular type of feeding must be taken into account when preparing daily rations, at the risk of incurring health problems.

- **Its teeth**, which continuously grow, are adapted to consuming large quantities of forage and fibres, which leads them to wear down regularly. You need to make sure, therefore that the horse has sufficient quantities of food available throughout the day.
- **The horse's stomach** is relatively small, adapted to small amounts ingested at each meal several times during the day. Horses are not ruminants, they swallow their food only after carefully chewing and humidifying it, using their abundant production of saliva.

The distribution of large meals results in incomplete digestion in the stomach and small intestine, as well as large inputs into the large intestine that can cause colic. Not eating food for a long period of time during the day results in acid build-up in the stomach that contributes towards the creation of potentially very painful stomach ulcers.

- Digestion in the **caecum** and **large intestine** involves the many microorganisms that make up the horse's intestinal flora. This is adapted to what the horse eats and changes progressively according to what they consume.

Respecting the digestion of your horse means giving it **regular meals**, at set times, divided **into at least three meals a day**. This ensures that consumption is spread over the day and part of the night. This is especially important for concentrated foods, especially cereals, which if given in too large quantities, are pushed into the large intestine where they ferment, causing very painful colic.

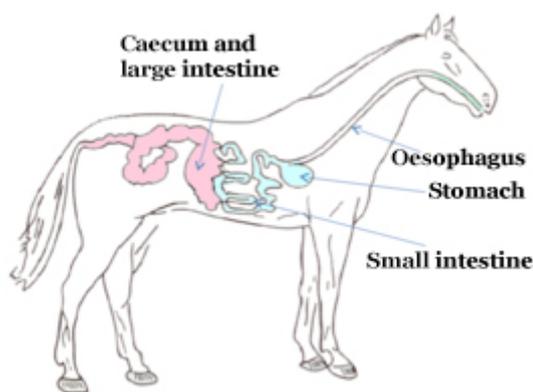


Diagram of the horse's digestive tract

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In addition, eating fibre throughout the day ensures that nutrients are consumed more slowly, meeting the horse's need to chew and ensuring a regular flow of food into the digestive tract. Dietary changes must be gradual to ensure that the flora in the large intestine has time to evolve and be effective. This flora not only feeds on the food but makes it digestible to the horse.

Dietary transitions must take place over several days (concentrated feeds) or even a few weeks (change of forage). Making the transition too rapidly can cause diarrhoea and colic.

Food which is adapted to the horse's needs, must respect the horse's natural feeding behaviour as much as possible.

Providing your horse with suitable food

Horses are herbivores. They eat:

- Pastured grass, potentially 50 to 100 kg gross per day if available and depending on physiological needs
- Preserved forage (hay, baleage and silage, straw)
- Concentrated feeds (various cereal grains or processed feeds containing cereals, meal, co-products, fodder, minerals and vitamins). For more information: how to read a food label

Of course, horses also consume **water** which must be freely **available at all times**. Water consumption will depend on the type of horse, but also on the type of feed consumed, its physiological stage (suckling), climatic conditions and any work it is doing.



Mouldy (baleage) fodder
© L. Marnay-Le Masne

Horses are also sensitive to the **quality of the feed** offered. They have a rather sophisticated palate and will tend to refuse spoiled or badly preserved food. However, if such food is consumed, it can cause potentially serious digestive disorders. How to assess the quality of forage ?

Likewise, **care must be taken about the dust content in the environment** and especially of the horse's feed. Because a horse is constantly breathing on its food, it can inhale large quantities of particles that can irritate the respiratory system (pollen, soil, moulds and various microorganisms). In the long run, this leads to chronic irritation of the respiratory tract, causing a worsening decline in performance.



Good quality fodder
© L. Marnay-Le-Masne

As well as paying attention to the choice of feeds (baleage, hay, flakes, etc.) it might also be a good idea to humidify some feeds just before serving them. Also pay attention to the quality of the horse's bedding!

Encouraging feeding from the ground also helps the systems that eliminate the particles inhaled by the horse to perform better, due to the downward position of its neck and therefore its trachea.

Providing the right sized portion

A **horse's nutrition needs** vary depending on the horse's breed, sex, age, size, physiological stage, temperament and any work it is carrying out. Nutrient intakes should therefore be assessed against all of these criteria (see preparing a ration of feed). For example, a sport pony will not have the same needs as a lactating saddle mare or a draft horse which is resting or working a little.



A horse in a stall on flax bedding
© L. Marnay-Le Masne

Observing your horse helps you establish and regularly check that the rations you are providing are appropriate to its needs: weigh the horse to define its needs, and then assess and monitor its body condition (the weight it has put on) at regular intervals.

It is important to adapt a horse's diet to its riding style:

- Take into account the amount of grass potentially consumed by a horse which has daily access to a paddock or even a meadow, depending on the season.
- However, don't forget to supply regular and sufficient forage (at least 1 to 1.5 kg per 100 kg of live weight/day) for horses on artificial bedding.

Finally, if you have any doubts or questions, get in touch with a professional, a vet or specialised technician who will be able to advise you.

About our writers

Laetitia MARNAY-LE MASNE Engineer IFCE