

HEALTH ZONE *Nutrition*

Feeding the Finicky Horse

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

As you head into your horse's stall to feed him his dinner, you notice he hasn't cleaned up his previous meal. He looks like he might be losing weight, and you wonder what else you can offer him that would spark his appetite.

Like kids who don't want to eat their vegetables, some horses are fussy eaters; it can be challenging to find ways to get them to eat enough food. There are many reasons why a horse might be finicky about his diet, and Dr. Burt Staniar, associate professor of equine science at Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences, says it's important to determine the cause, especially if the horse is losing weight.

Many health conditions, management changes, and palate preferences can cause a horse to hesitate before chowing down

"The thin horse and the picky eater may be interrelated or may be totally different problems," he said.

Before making diet changes, ensure your horse has no underlying health issues you and your veterinarian must correct; otherwise, any diet adjust-

ment alone isn't likely to help.

"If a skinny horse isn't eating much, consult your veterinarian," he said. "Several causes come to mind—such as teeth problems or gastrointestinal (GI) tract problems. Are ulcers an issue?"

Common Causes

Many health conditions, management changes, and individual palate preferences can cause a horse to hesitate before eating; the following are some examples. Make note of your horse's recent history and behavior, and work with your veterinarian and/or nutritionist to pinpoint the actual reason.

Feed changes

Horses whose feed has been changed might not be eager to dive right into their new grub.

"The term I use is neophobia," Staniar said. "Horses may be reluctant to try anything that has a new texture, smell, flavor, or is different from what they are accustomed to."

One solution to this problem is to introduce the new feed gradually—both to get him accustomed to the taste and to give his GI tract bacteria time to adapt to digesting



A comfortable environment is important for keeping a horse's appetite healthy

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Underlying health problems might be affecting a horse's appetite

something different. You might see an adjustment period when the horse won't eat his full amount, but give him time (several weeks). Just because your horse doesn't consume every morsel doesn't mean you need to change his feed yet again.

Inconsistent ingredients

If one bag of feed tastes different than the last batch, your horse might not eat it, even though it is the same feed.

"You can't make exactly the same batch of cookies the same way all the time. Some will just taste better than others," said Dr. Daniel J. Burke, director of equine nutrition at Tribute Equine Nutri-

tion, in Upper Sandusky, Ohio. "Even in the same mill, you can get variations in the incoming ingredients."

Feed timing

Consider feeding time as it relates to his exercise schedule.

"Usually exercise will stimulate appetite but it can also depress appetite if the horse is working very hard," Staniar said. "This may be a situation that is specific for each individual horse, so try to gain a better understanding of how factors such as exercise affect your individual horse."

Stressful situations

Staniar suggests asking yourself the

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Changes in a horse's appetite, especially a complete lack of appetite, often set the stage for plummeting racetrack performance. Though the physical pressures of training and the mental stress of the backside environment are sometimes blamed for inappetence, top trainers know there could be a physiological cause—hindgut acidosis.

Simply put, hindgut acidosis is a drop in the pH of the cecum and colon, usually caused by overconsumption of starch-laden feed. When too much starch is consumed at one time, some passes through the small intestine without becoming digested and enters the hindgut. As the microorganisms of the hindgut process the starch, the pH drops, causing damage to the intestinal lining and changes in appetite, feed efficiency, behavior, and performance.

Thoroughbreds in race training are particularly predisposed to hindgut acidosis because they typically require large amounts of feed to fuel exercise.

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following questions: Does your horse reside in a comfortable environment where he can relax and take time to eat? Does he have shelter and shade? Is he able to stay cool enough in summer and warm enough in winter that his appetite won't be impaired? Is he in a stressful situation—such as living beside an aggressive horse? If the horse is uncomfortable, nervous, or stressed, he won't be thinking about eating.

Dehydration

“Does he have enough water? If he isn't drinking enough, this will cut down on feed intake,” Staniar said.

Horses need adequate water for proper digestion and to produce saliva, which mixes with feed for ease of chewing and swallowing.

Feeder position

“Horses are either left-sided or right-sided on how they want to eat,” Burke said. “Sometimes if you move the feeder to a different location in the stall, they are



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

A low feeder mimics a horse's natural grazing position and is thought to be relaxing

more comfortable eating.”

Placing the feeder down low rather than up high can also make a difference, be-

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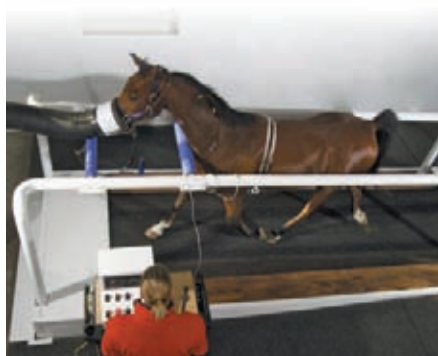
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cause it is more natural for horses to eat from the ground.

“A study recently published by a research group in North Carolina showed there is some endorphin release when a horse’s head is down in grazing position... which relaxes them,” Burke said.

Gastric ulcers

Owners and veterinarians see ulcers in many horses, especially Thoroughbreds. Confinement, stress, and consuming grain diets rather than continual small amounts of forage can cause this painful condition. Affected horses begin to associate eating with ulcer pain; they might eat only parts of their meal, or they might refuse to eat altogether.

“The challenge is figuring out whether the horse has gastric ulcers or a hindgut that’s not functioning correctly,” said equine nutritionist Dr. Bill Vandergrift of Versailles, Ky. “Many horses...tend to just nibble at their grain and then eat their hay instead. When we observe this, we are pretty sure we have a hindgut problem, especially if their manure has a dif-

ferent odor and/or consistency.”

Mycotoxin contamination

One thing that sporadically decreases horses’ feed consumption is the presence of mycotoxins, which are toxic metabolites produced by mold. Depending on weather conditions when grain was harvested, mycotoxin contamination levels might be higher in some regions than in others.

Meal Size: More is not Better

Horses in natural conditions nibble on grass through much of the day and night.

“They eat for about 14 to 18 hours out of 24 hours,” Staniar said. “Yet when we feed horses, we are generally feeding two meals (morning and evening). Some people feed three meals, but horses are trickle feeders. They are meant to eat a little bit all along,” and this is evident in how their GI tract is built. It handles many small meals offered frequently throughout the day more safely than it does large amounts.

So, if you expect your horse to eat more than, say, five pounds of hay or concen-

ENCOURAGE YOUR HORSE TO EAT

If your horse is fussy at feed time, consider these tips from our sources to make his meal more palatable (Bonus: Many of these also encourage weight gain in skinny horses, whether finicky or not.):

1. Choose forage with a high leaf-to-stem ratio. “It will be more palatable and nutritious if it’s not as mature, there are more leaves than stems, and it’s not as fibrous,” said Dr. Burt Staniar, assistant professor of equine science at Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences. Fewer food particles and the nutrients therein will pass through the GI tract undigested.
2. Feed a higher-quality hay. Better-quality hay can be more appealing to eat and help add condition to a skinny horse, Staniar said.
3. Make supplements more palatable. Equine nutritionist Dr. Bill Vandergrift of Versailles, Ky., suggests doing this by dampening the food with water. “This can help, especially with powdery or granular-type supplements,” he said. “This tends to minimize odor and also helps stick it to the feed so the horse can’t sort it out and leave it.” He also suggests adding a small amount of molasses or applesauce to a feed you know the horse likes to ease ingestion of the mixed-in supplement.
4. Check feed labels. By law, companies have to list ingredients on feed labels, but some companies don’t break it down into specifics. To determine whether you’re inadvertently feeding a product that’s not very digestible (and, thus, not that tasty or helpful for weight gain), work with a nutritionist and ask the feed manufacturer to provide you with a complete breakdown of ingredients.
5. Adjust fat content. “Higher-fat feeds tend to make the horse feel satiated more quickly,” Burke said, explaining why your horse might not finish his meal. There is a lot of individual difference, however, in how horses respond to fat, so work with your veterinarian and nutritionist to find a happy medium.

By Heather Smith Thomas

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trates in one meal, he simply might not want to comply.

“The horse’s stomach only holds about two gallons,” Burke said. “We frequently run into this problem with racehorses or hard keepers that are expected to eat a lot. If meal size is large, they won’t finish it—either because of stomach capacity issues or satiety.

“When changing feeds, some people tell me their horse isn’t eating the new feed very well, but if the horse is finishing it before the next meal, don’t worry about it,” Burke added. “Eating slowly is natural for a horse and healthier than bolting down a large meal. But most people want the horse to finish quickly because of their own schedule, so they can turn the horse out again and go to work.”

Building an Appetite

One strategy for encouraging a horse to eat is to improve the palatability of his feed.

“You can add small amounts of molasses or some other fla-

“When changing feeds, some people tell me their horse isn’t eating the new feed very well, but if the horse is finishing it before the next meal, don’t worry about it.”

DR. DANIEL J. BURKE

voring the horse likes,” Staniar said. “When giving a horse five pounds of concentrate feed, I might add a half cup of molasses at most. This small amount won’t have an adverse effect on glycemic response (the level of blood glucose that rises in response to a meal).”

Some horses might prefer a couple of spoonfuls of applesauce mixed into the grain.

Horses might also respond well to a few drops of anise (licorice flavor) or peppermint oil (each offers a little flavor and pleasant odor).

Today’s feeding trends are moving away from molasses-laden sweet feeds and toward low-sugar/starch diets. The trick for manufacturers is making sure they appeal to horses’ tastes.

“We use a variety of flavors, but the classic one is anise,” Burke

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said. "We came out with a feed we call banana treat, based on research that found banana to be one of (horses') preferred flavors."

At some point you might have to experiment with different feeds to see what a horse likes best.

"In some situations we don't know why a horse might prefer one type of feed over another. We don't always understand what drives those preferences," said Staniar.

Take-Home Message

To summarize, if a horse suddenly becomes fussy about food, check with your veterinarian to make sure there are no underlying health issues before altering his diet. If you change a fussy horse's feed, there are some tricks you can use to help convince him that the new feed is acceptable. Horses are like kids, with specific likes and dislikes regarding food, and they can be just as challenging to please. **EH**

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