

Questions & Answers

BY DR. STEPHEN DUREN

Q If I feed my horse 15 lb of hay per day, would he eat the same amount of hay pellets or hay cubes? If I were to switch my horse from baled hay to cubes or pellets, can I do this overnight, or does it need to be a gradual transition?

A One of the most prevalent causes of colic and/or digestive upset is a sudden change in diet. Dietary change should be made slowly over a two-week period. It takes at least this long for the digestive system to adjust to the new feed. A satisfactory method for switching horses from baled hay to cubes involves simply adding a few cubes on top of the baled hay at each feeding. Horses will take some time in learning to eat hay cubes; a certain amount of awkwardness should be expected in the transition.

Yes, you would start by feeding the same amount. Hay cubes and hay pellets are made of the same basic material (dried plants) as long stem baled hay. Research has shown that no differences in digestibility occur between good quality baled hay and the same hay made into pellets or cubes. If the type of hay used in the cube or pellet is different from the type of long stem hay currently being fed, you may need to adjust (increase or decrease) the amount of pellets depending on the body condition of the horse. For example, if you are feeding grass hay and switch to an alfalfa cube the amount of calories in a pound of alfalfa cubes is higher than contained in one pound of grass hay. Therefore, the horse may require fewer pounds of alfalfa cubes to maintain body weight. If the type of hay used in the cube or pellet is the same as what the horse had been eating, feed the same weight.


Q I have a friend who has complained that his horse eats the shavings in his stall when he feeds pellets. He thinks it is due to a lack of fiber in the pellets. Is this true?

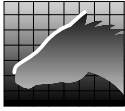
A Eating bedding material could be a sign of a fiber deficient diet. The major criteria would be the amount of fiber in the pellet or cubes and the amount of the product being fed. The amount of fiber in a hay pellet will be similar to the amount of fiber in a baled product as long as the pellet does not contain low fiber additives such as grain. Many hay pellets contain some grain to help them stick together. It is also common for pelleted and/or cubed hay products to consist of "rabbit quality" hay. Rabbit quality hay is typically lower in fiber than more mature hay. If the pellets contain both a low fiber content and added grain, they will be higher in energy. This will result in fewer pounds of product necessary to maintain body weight. Ultimately,

one could get into a situation where the horse requires only a small amount of high energy pellet to maintain body condition, but this small amount of feed does not provide adequate gut fill to maintain a "full" feeling in the horse. The horse may eat bedding to maintain a full digestive system. Another factor to consider is that horses are designed to graze and/or eat on a constant basis. Pelleted diets can be eaten rapidly and leave many hours of boredom, leaving a hay to graze on whatever is available. These grazing choices often include bedding and fence boards.

Q I was told by a stallion owner that my mare is "too fat" and won't get pregnant at her present body weight. Can this be true?

A Yes, it is possible for an obese mare to get in foal; however there are several factors to consider. Research conducted in the mid-1980s set out to determine how body condition influenced reproductive performance in mares. In this large study, moderately fleshy to fat mares (body condition score 3 - 4, 0-5 scale) cycled earlier in the year, had fewer cycles per conception, had a higher pregnancy rate and maintained pregnancy more often than thin (body condition 2 and below) mares. Research also indicated thin mares (ribs visible) with foals by their sides do not have enough stored fat to support efficient reproductive performance. Mares in marginal or poor body condition are more likely to skip a breeding year as their bodies use dietary nutrients for milk production rather than for reproduction. This study also pointed out that mares that become pregnant but receive inadequate nutrition have a higher rate of embryo loss. Reproductive performance can be improved in thin mares when they are fed to gain weight. However, pushing a mare that has been nutritionally neglected can lead to problems with digestive upset if feed intake and weight gain increase too quickly.

Foaling difficulty and rebreeding problems have not been scientifically linked to obesity in mares. However, there is no reproductive advantage in having mares extremely fat (body condition score 5). Hormonal changes associated with obesity may limit reproductive success, but the additional feed expenses necessary to keep mares extremely fat should be reason enough to keep mares in lighter body condition. Absolute weight is not the only important criteria by which to evaluate the horse. Appearance and condition have always been used as indicators of fitness and health. 



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011-64-09-379-1869
011-64-03-300-3185 FAX

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514-527-9452 FAX

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501 Division Ave.
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Otter Co-Op

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