

Equine Q & A

Q Is it safe to feed sunflower seeds to horses? If so, what nutritional benefits do the seeds provide?

Yes, whole sunflower seeds are safe for horses and ponies when doled out in moderation, but the type of seeds fed should be chosen carefully. In North America, sunflower seed varieties fall into one of two categories, confectionery or oilseed. Confectionery sunflower seeds are primarily harvested and processed for human consumption, either as a shelled, roasted snack food or as dehulled seeds for the baking industry. Oilseed varieties, on the other hand, are grown to fill the demand for bird-feed and sunflower oil, a high-quality vegetable oil. Characterized by black hulls, oilseed sunflower seeds are appropriate for horses; confectionery varieties usually have striped hulls and are slightly larger than oilseed varieties. The hulls of the oilseed varieties are typically thinner and thus more digestible by horses. Oilseed varieties typically weigh more than confectionery types, likely due to the density of innate oil. This oil is a great source of dietary fat and is the primary reason most horsemen divvy out sunflower seeds to their charges.

The amount of fat in sunflower seeds ranges from 26 to 45%; this disparity is due to differences in sunflower varieties. Therefore, sunflower seeds contain slightly more fat than rice bran (20%) but significantly less than plant or vegetable oils (100%). If a horse has developed an aversion to other fat supplements, which is often the case with vegetable oils, whole sunflower seeds may be an appropriate alternative.

No hard-and-fast guidelines for feeding sunflower seeds have been established. From anecdotal accounts, feeding one pound (about two cups depending on seed type) per day seems to improve coat condition, one benefit of sunflower seeds. Giving more than this may present palatability issues, and horses, with their incredibly mobile lips, will be able to separate the seeds from other elements of the grain mix should they develop a distaste for them. As with the introduction of any new feedstuff to the ration, gradually increase the amount of sunflower seeds offered over a period of several days.

Q My horse slobbers uncontrollably when he is allowed access to clover pastures. What causes this, and is there anything I can do to prevent it? Should I worry?

As long as all other causes of have been ruled out (e.g., traumatic mouth injury, esophageal obstruction or choke, and viral infections such as vesicular stomatitis), profuse salivation is likely occurring because the horse is consuming legumes infected with the fungus *Rhizoctonia*



Black oilseed sunflower varieties (left) are appropriate for horses as an added source of fat. Steer clear of feeding the larger striped seeds (right).

leguminicola. This fungus grows on legumes of all kinds and not solely red clover, as some horsemen mistakenly believe. If harboring sufficient fungal loads, white clover, alsike clover, alfalfa, ladino, and lespedeza can induce slobbering. The fungus produces slaframine, and it is this mycotoxin that actually provokes the extreme salivation. In humid growing condition, the fungus proliferates quickly and is visible on plant leaves as gold, brown, or black spots or rings (thus the name “black patch disease”). Excessive salivation will commence several days following initial consumption of fungus-ridden plants, and it is not unusual for horses to generate 12-15 gallons of saliva daily. Because of this hyperproduction of saliva, mild to severe dehydration can occur in horses, particularly during hot weather.

Slaframine content in stored forages such as hay decreases as time elapses. In one study of baled red clover conducted in the early 1980s, the amount of slaframine decreased from 100 ppm (parts per million) to 7 ppm over a ten-month period.

Although there is no treatment for slaframine overload other than removing infected plants from the diet, certain pasture management practices can minimize the occurrence of the condition: sow no more than 40% legumes in pastures; spot-check leaves of legume plants for telltale spots or rings during periods of high moisture; utilize a drylot for horses if affected pastures remain wet for an extended time and feed supplemental hay; and mow pasture grasses to maintain plant height at about three to four inches. If these recommendations cannot be worked into the pasture management scheme, horses should be offered free-choice salt and water during hot weather to counteract any dehydration that might occur with the ingestion of legumes contaminated with *Rhizoctonia leguminicola*. ☐☐