

Hay is for Horses: Going against the Grain (All puns intended)

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The title pairs two common phrases used for many different applications, but in the context of this article, which is intended for horse owners, the phrases may be a little controversial. Longstanding traditions die hard, and the tradition of feeding grain to our horses is no exception. I know this because every day I recommend diet changes to new clients and those looking for help online.

This is kind of a “Part 2” to my article “Problems With Feeding Practices,” available on my website- www.nativehoof.com/articles. After studying, researching, and observing my own horses and those of my clients, I have discovered that moving away from all grains in the equine diet has made significant positive health changes. I feel compelled to share what my clients and I have been doing and the results thus far.

As I wrote in my “Problems” article, the majority of the processed feed sold in cleverly crafted, colorful bags contain what is essentially waste products from the big grain, soy, ethanol (corn) and sugar beet industries. Most, if not all, of these products are GM (genetically modified), and treated with chemical herbicides and pesticides. (FYI—all beet pulp sold in the US is now GM unless it is clearly marked “organic.”) There is an abundance of research published on the harmful effects to both people and animals that consume these products long term. The implications of consuming GM foods in terms of how they affect our health are now coming to the forefront. Gluten intolerance, food allergies, bowel disorders, etc., are becoming so common that the human food industry is meeting the need with special dietary choices available in most supermarkets and restaurants. When this happens, you know that our maladies have become profitable enough for the food industry to make an investment in it. Think about it!

For a couple of years now, I have been suspecting that these same problems are plaguing our horses as well. At the moment, I have no science or proof to back it up, just a hunch. But recently “TheHorse.com” published an article exploring the possibilities of gluten intolerance in horses (Possibility of Gluten Sensitivity in Horses Examined,” May 9, 2012 #19990). There was enough evidence in the study to warrant further testing, confirming that I have been on the right track with my thoughts and suspicions.

So, where am I going with this? Forage, defined as hay and/or pasture, is the most important food we must have available for our horses. In nature, this is all that is available to them, and not in the form of 2 flakes of hay in the morning and 2 flakes in the evening with a bucket of grain! Unfortunately, for our domestic horses this is still a common feeding practice. Our concept of feeding meals to a species that was designed to have food flowing through its GI tract constantly to maintain health has not gone well for horses. Colic and laminitis are still considered to be the top 2 reasons to euthanize a horse. Both conditions have their genesis in the diet. Having forage available at all times (24/7) is critical to equine gut health. However, many horse owners are faced with a conundrum here, as rich, cultivated pasture for many horses must be limited because of metabolic issues and obesity. Sound familiar? I

have never seen so many overweight people and animals in my entire life as I do now.

Making hay available in slow feeders or in small piles spread out so horses have to move to get from one to the other is a huge step toward fulfilling their need for constant *forage* and *movement*. These two things *must* go together. As a matter of fact we humans could benefit from eating like a grazer throughout the day. We would not be struggling with weight issues and the complications it brings if we applied some of these principles to ourselves.

I am an advocate for keeping horses in a Paddock Paradise or Track System environment, which provides constant forage and movement. This topic is another article all in itself, so I will not go into the details here (you can explore the link at the end of this article). This is the environment I keep my own horses in.

The big question I am often asked is, “How do we get vitamins and minerals into our horses if we don’t feed them grain?” Well, grain is not necessary to provide these things. Remember, the majority of these feeds consist of waste products and floor sweepings; the vitamins and minerals added are generally in cheap forms with poor absorbability. As herbivores, horses need minerals, especially salt. Salt blocks, meant for cows with rough tongues, are too refined for horse consumption. Some of the options I have used and see others using are loose salt, and a more natural salt like Redmond Rocks and Himalayan Sea Salt. I use loose granular Celtic Sea Salt—10lbs in a bucket hanging in a shelter to keep the weather out. These natural salts also have other minerals in them. Quality hay and limited grass will give a horse most of the vitamins it does not already produce in the metabolic process.

I use the mineral supplement Animal Trace Minerals for my horses and recommend it for many of the horses I see in my work. It shows significant results in most horses (mules and donkeys, too). But how do we get them to eat it? I have used timothy hay cubes—just a few (yes, I am serious)—about 2–3 cubes soaked in a little water as a supplement *carrier*. It takes less than a minute for a horse to eat it from a bowl or bucket. I also add probiotics because nearly every horse has been treated with antibiotics at some point in its life, has been chemically dewormed, and experienced stress, all of which can disturb and even wipe out the beneficial microflora in the gut. Some holistic vets I have spoken with feel that once the microflora have been destroyed, lifelong consumption of probiotics is necessary to maintain gut health.

I am experimenting with my herd on converting to free choice minerals and salts, and ditching the buckets all together. So far we are doing very well. I started by mixing the minerals in with the salt. Next, we will leave the minerals in a separate bucket and see what happens. I now only use the hay cubes for herbal deworming and occasional probiotics for those who need it until I find a free choice system that works. The more I delve into this, I am finding that the less I do, the better off the horses are.

For horses that are healthy, this feeding plan is often sufficient, and for other horses that are not quite there, it’s still enough to get them healthy given enough *time*. (Our society calls patience a virtue, but it has become a lost one in a world of instant gratification.) There is no shortage of malnourished, abused and neglected horses that need more food than a healthy horse, but they don’t need grain to get there. Yes, they need nutrition, but I have often found that when bringing an

emaciated horse back to health, people look for quick results with concentrates, and more often than not that turns out to be a sweet feed. Do the horses improve? Well yes, because any food is better than no food. What I often see though, are horses with big bellies, fat pads, and no topline. These horses are often positive for ulcers. You cannot build topline with diet alone. It must be done through movement, and biomechanically correct movement at that.

What is happening in the effort to help the horse restore weight this way is the equivalent of humans doing it with donuts or MacDonald's. Movement is medicine, and horses are meant to move 10–20 miles per day. This is unheard of in domestication, and anything close to it is the rare exception.

Because of the nature of my business, I receive articles and magazines both by mail and e-mail, and the litany of diseases and syndromes in the equine world has skyrocketed in recent years. Despite all the advances we claim to have made, it has not gone well for so many horses. Some of them may live longer than they would have 20 years ago, but what do we call "living"? I see so many sick and lame horses on "life support," just existing with drugs and endless supplements sometimes only to fulfill our emotional needs. We need to start asking why and how we got to this place.

On the few occasions I have had the privilege of spending time with wild/feral horses, my reason for going is to find answers to help their domestic counterparts whom I care for on a daily basis. Everything that we have created in our "Equine Market" is simply that—a market, and it has nothing to do with the true nature of the horse or its needs. It's all about US! And how to make keeping them convenient for US!

In essence going against the "grain" is not just merely food related, but going against traditions that have been around far longer than I. If health and wellness is something we are really after, for ourselves as well as our horses, our thinking and traditions must be challenged. Don't wait until you come to a crisis. Begin the process now and avoid the crisis altogether.

Links for further study:

Read my article "Problems With Feeding Practices"

<http://www.nativehoof.com/articles>

GMO- <http://gmo.mercola.com/sites/gmo/scientific-studies.aspx>

Possibility of Gluten Sensitivity in Horses Examined", May 9. 2012 #19990

<http://www.thehorse.com/ViewArticle.aspx?ID=19990>

www.theholistichorse.com

www.animaltraceminerals.com

<http://paddockparadise/wetpaint.com/>

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