



Safer Grazing

The horse industry is struggling to develop a better understanding of the issues surrounding sugars, non-structural carbohydrates and grasses for horses. Over the years, pasture grasses and related grazing principles have been developed for horses through the cattle and sheep industries. This means we have grass species with extremely high levels of sugars and carbohydrates -- good for fattening up animals bound for milk or meat production and early age slaughter, but not good for horses.

In horses, “fat” is not healthy. The high sugar and non-structural carbohydrate issues in hay and grass may explain why we are now seeing so many overweight horses with metabolic disorders and insulin resistance problems. The way we’ve been grazing horses and the types of pastures we’ve developed may be contributing to very serious horse health issues.

If your horse is overweight or already has suffered a metabolic disorder (such as Cushings, laminitis, Equine Metabolic Syndrome, insulin resistance, Polysaccharide Storage Myopathy, etc.) you need to research options for reducing sugars and carbohydrates in their diet. Watch your horse’s waistline, and do your best to keep him/her in good health before diet related problems become an issue. Here are some grazing tips that can help reduce the sugar and carb load in your horse’s diet.

Avoid overgrazing. The greatest amount of sugar in a grass plant is in the bottom three inches. Allowing

horses to overgraze pastures adds high amounts of sugars to their diets. It’s best for your horse— and for the health of your grass—to remove horses from pastures once the grass has been grazed down to three or four inches. Keep horses in a sacrifice area or rotate them to a new pasture until the grass has had a chance to grow back to six or eight inches. For more help designing a rotational grazing system for your property, contact the Snohomish Conservation District.

Night grazing. The best time to graze while gaining maximum benefit of forage without adding extra fat on your horse is between 3AM and 10AM. At this time pasture plants have used up most of the accumulated sugar that built up during the day. Since there aren’t many of us who want to get up at 2:45AM, you may want to turn horses out as late as possible in the evening (say, 10PM, and bring them in the next morning before heading off to work. Another useful alternative to night grazing is turning horses out on pasture in the early morning (say, 6AM) and bringing them in around 10AM when plant production of sugar becomes high once again.

Cold weather. Pasture plants store carbohydrates at very high levels during cool weather (under 40 degrees), making it a particularly dangerous time to graze. Don’t graze during these times, especially if there is frost. This is a key issue and will wreak havoc with an at-risk horse’s metabolic condition.

Brown grass. Don't be fooled by the late summer brown grass—brown grasses can be very high in sugars! Pastures are healthiest for horses (i.e. lowest in sugars) during the active growing season when plants are green. Graze horses during the active growing seasons (spring & early summer) and limit grazing of dried out and brown pastures.

Grazing muzzles. Easy-keepers may need a grazing muzzle, a device that only allows the horse to eat through a small opening in the bottom, allowing them to eat a limited amount of grass. An internet search will give you several options, plus tips on safety and how to use them.



In addition to grazing management, here are some general points to keep in mind:

Weight. Talk with your vet to determine where your horse's weight should be and how best to manage their diet.

Hay. When feeding, always weigh hay and don't cheat; one pound can make a big difference. You may also want to consider using a slow feeder. There are a number of different kinds of slow feeders on the market, but all are designed to limit the rate at which a horse can consume hay.



Grain. Cut out grain and carbs. Except for specifically developed low-carbohydrate products, all grain, complete feeds and concentrates add huge amounts of sugars and non-structural carbohydrates to a horse's diet. Horses only require these in their diets when lacking in energy or low in weight.

Exercise. Exercising a horse as little as 30 minutes per day, three times a week, can make a big difference by improving their metabolism. Most horses with metabolic issues are not getting enough exercise. Horses (like their humans!) need regular exercise as part of their standard care regime.



Seek help from a veterinarian and/or other professionals experienced in this area, especially if you have an at-risk horse. Also, keep in mind that for any changes you institute, you need to give the situation time in order to evaluate its effectiveness. Any changes in diet need to be done gradually in order to give the horse's gut time to adjust.

Questions?

Snohomish Conservation District farm planners can be reached at 425-335-5634.

This fact sheet is adapted from an article by Alayne Blickle, Director of Horses for Clean Water. For more information, please visit HorsesforCleanWater.com