



## Improve Your Horse's Health with Slower Hay Consumption!

Many researchers and nutritionists are trying to find an answer to why domestic horses have so many issues with the way we feed them cut grass hay. Their findings are really interesting to me. I have a small equine rehabilitation center near Austin, TX and we specialize in rehab for horses with hoof issues.

90 to 95% of founder and Laminitis cases have been proven to be diet related problems. Horses can also founder because of mechanical stress on the hoof (commonly called road founder), get bitten by venomous snakes, retain placenta after foaling or even from too much of certain drugs like antibiotics, but all of these "other" reasons make up a very small percentage of founder cases.

Because of my interests in repairing and preventing founder, I started following equine nutritionists and micro biologists and other researchers that were documenting how to control the sugar intake of the domestic horse. Wild horses do not seem to have many issues with hoof ailments and especially founder and laminitis. If they do get laminitis, they seem to repair themselves with movement and change of forage. Our domestic horses many times do not have that option available to them.



Reducing the sugar intake of your domestic horse will result in a much healthier horse. Since cut grass hay is the main staple for all our domestic horses, it is the area that I focused my attention. It goes without saying that if you feed processed feed, you can control the amount of sugar in the feed by being selective of the feeds you choose. Hay selection is another challenge to most of us that have to buy hay from different farms. You do have the option of sending samples off to be tested for sugars and starch, but that can get time consuming and expensive. A better answer is to try to manipulate the hay that is available. One way is to soak the hay for an hour to leech a lot of the sugar and starch out of the hay. This also becomes time consuming and you will also leech out good things like minerals and vitamins and possibly even some protein. A better answer seems to be to feed cut grass hay out of a "slow feeder".

You can search the internet for "slow feeders" and find a ton of experimental feeders that individuals have tried...you will also find some that are being made commercially. Many of these ideas and products are really great and have proven to reduce the "speed" the hay is consumed. This gives the equine liver time to process sugars, starches, and even toxins that might be in the hay from fertilizers and weed killers, etc. It also gives the entire digestive system time to do its job. Flora and Fauna of the gut system can perform much better and more nutrients are extracted when the horse takes smaller bites and eats slower.

Scientists are still trying to find a complete explanation as to why an equine will produce more saliva and masticate the hay longer when using a slow feeder and taking small bites that mimic grazing. It is believed that feeding an equine through a small opening (less than 2") may produce a bit of resistance and that resistance may be the trigger for more saliva production and chewing longer. At any rate, the result is the same- hay is in a better digestible state when it enters the stomach.

When the horse swallows a large bite of hay, he does not chew it long enough or produce enough “slime” (saliva) to help prepare the hay for the stomach, the stomach must work harder to try to process that bite. As it is trying to break down the cellulous in that large bite of hay, the horse is busy sending yet another big bite to the stomach.



We all know equines cannot regurgitate, so the response to overeating is to continue to move the hay prematurely through each of the digestive areas, the stomach, the secrum (hind gut), the intestines and then out of the horse whether or not the nutrition has been extracted. The end result is that the brain is telling the horse he is starving (because the food is not processed as well as it should be). The brain says, “eat more” and the horse does - if it has free choice hay. If not, he will stand and wait for hours for the next meal that he once again will eat too quickly. Also, there is a very good chance this horse will develop stomach ulcers.

Providing your horse with hay in a slow feeder will be a huge step in the right direction for your horse’s health.

Restricting the amount of hay in each bite is a more natural way to provide good nutrition from our domestic, cut grass hay. The restriction of using a 2” or less hole for the hay to be “nibbled” through has another great side benefit: HAY LASTS LONGER! What a great side-effect of better nutrition! It does take a few extra minutes to prepare the hay in a slow feeding situation, but you save all those extra trips out to the barn to replace hay! For example...five horses on a large round bale with just a hay ring will consume the hay in approximately 10 days (there are, of course, many variables...weather, age and personality of horses, activity level, etc.)...but this is just one farm and their findings... 5 horses...1 bale with hay-ring...10 days. Same 5 horses, same hay-ring, but bale has a net with 1.75” holes...hay last 20 to 26 days! AND there

is no mess around the hayring to rake up! Keep in mind, horses will eat more in cold weather and eat less in hot weather.

I personally use The Nibble Net product for feeding flakes of hay and the Texas Haynet for feeding round bales or large 8’x8’ square bales of hay. Texas Haynet will soon have a square bale feeder designed for an entire small square bale!

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