



ALL ABOUT NUTRITION MYTHS

There are many persistent myths in the horse world. People do all kinds of things by habit or by relying on advice from friends, such as a neighbour for whom a certain solution worked, or a coach who hasn't necessarily seen the specific horse. This is particularly true in equine nutrition. Here we debunk ten of these especially tenacious myths:

Myth #1: Oats and simple grains are more “natural” for horses than commercial feeds

False. These are more traditional foods, but they are not more natural! Horses originally evolved to survive on grass. Even dry hay is not quite “natural” for horses, as its water and vitamin contents are considerably different from that of fresh grass. Simple grains are good basic ingredients for a feed, but they are incomplete in themselves. Additionally, corn and barley, if served uncrimped, are not very digestible and may increase the risk of gas colic. In my practice, I often hear people say, “My father and grandfather have always fed oats and their horses have always looked fine!” And indeed, in the past, giving oats was the best option to put weight on a horse because it is the only grain that can be safely fed unprocessed. However, oats contain only little protein, few minerals and no vitamins. Nowadays, there are many ways to process grains to improve their digestibility, and other calorie sources are now available, such as vegetable oil.

Myth #2: My horse needs only hay, he is fat and in good condition as it is.

False. Hay does not provide all the necessary nutrients for a horse's health. No hay produced in Quebec, no matter how high the quality, will contain selenium, sufficient trace elements (i.e., zinc), or vitamins after a just a few weeks of storage. While it is quite possible that a horse may survive several years on a hay-only diet, in the long run, the lack of selenium will have an effect. After several years, selenium deficiency may even cause death in horses and each year, unfortunately, fatal cases are in fact reported. Broodmares and foals are particularly vulnerable to such deficiencies. It is also to be noted that a fat horse is not necessarily a healthy horse.

Myth #3: Wild horses survive without supplements or feed and they are perfectly fine.

False. First of all, most wild horses probably would not survive very long without human intervention. In fact, a portion of the wild horse herds in America are rounded up each year to be fed and for population control purposes to ensure their survival. There were no horses in America before the arrival of European settlers, and the so-called wild horses that roam North America are the descendants of domesticated horses. Furthermore, nowadays, there are very few horses whose genetics really stem from “wild” strains, such as the Mongolian Przewalski horses. European soil also contains much more selenium than in North America and the climate there allows horses to

graze for a greater part of the year, conditions that are more favourable for their survival. And don't forget that horses in the wild will rarely live up to 30 years!

Myth #4: It is normal for an old or hot-blooded horse (like a Thoroughbred) to be a little thin.

False. All horses can put on weight. It's not a question of age or temperament, it is a matter of providing a proper and balanced diet. To adequately feed a horse, it is important to consider its age, level of activity, temperament, the state of its teeth, etc. Of course, an older horse who has poor teeth will be more expensive to keep in good condition than a young horse, but that wouldn't be a good excuse to keep him too thin, would it?

Myth #5: I do not need to supplement my horse; his feed is complete.

True and false. It all depends on the amount he's fed. Theoretically, all feeds are complete when they are fed according to the recommendations printed on the label. However, very few horses will require as much feed. Of course, there is no need to overfeed them and make them obese to meet their mineral and vitamin requirements! If a horse requires less feed than the amount recommended on the label and his condition is good, simply add a vitamin and mineral supplement to the ration.

Myth #6: If I do not feed concentrates to my horse, he will not have enough energy to perform.

False. Concentrated feeds are used to increase the calorie intake of a ration. If a horse stays in good condition when fed only hay, why would we add extra calories to the diet? While a mineral and vitamin supplement is necessary, and a protein source could also be beneficial in some cases, obesity will certainly not improve his performance!

Myth #7: If I feed my horse right before a competition, he will be sluggish and will perform poorly.

True and false. It will depend on what is fed. It is best not to give a concentrated feed right before exercise, especially if it is rich in carbohydrates, because the following insulin response will interfere with the body's use of the glucose stored in the muscles. This effect lasts four to five hours and will decrease performance, especially during anaerobic exercise (short duration and high intensity). On the other hand, if the horse has free-choice access to hay, his stomach acidity will stay under control, so he will be more comfortable and more likely to perform.

Myth #8: Alfalfa is dangerous for horses.

False. Myths surrounding alfalfa are widespread: it is said to cause laminitis and excitement, and I have even heard that it could cause blood in the urine... Alfalfa is not evil! It is an excellent food source that contains more calories, protein and calcium than timothy hay. Of course, if you have a Haflinger that gets fat by simply looking at straw, it would be a poor choice since the extra calories may cause obesity and insulin resistance, which can then lead to laminitis, but alfalfa is not the problem here. However, if a horse requires high energy intakes, alfalfa is an excellent choice to reduce the amount of concentrates required. Moreover, thanks to its protein and calcium content, it will reduce stomach acidity more effectively than grass hay.

Myth #9: A block of salt is a block of salt, no matter what colour it is.

False. Coloured salt blocks contain trace elements such as iodine and cobalt that can become toxic when consumed in large quantities. Salt is only sodium chloride, so it's best to use a white salt block. The problem with these salt blocks is that they frequently result in insufficient or irregular intakes. A good way to ensure that a horse regularly consumes an adequate amount of salt would be to add mixing salt or livestock salt directly into the daily ration. Two tablespoons a day will meet the needs of most average-sized adult horses.

Myth #10: Using beet pulp alone is a good way to put weight on my horse.

False. Beet pulp is a source of high-quality fibre but it is low in calories. A hay that is not too mature will contain as much energy. Beet pulp is useful when we need to feed our horses with an overly mature hay since it has a prebiotic effect due to its high digestibility and its pectin content. It can therefore replace part of the hay in a ration. However, it is essential to serve it soaked precisely because it is rich in pectin. This is what causes the pulp to swell considerably on contact with water and it is imperative that this occurs before it is ingested to prevent choking and colic.

Fact; Though Beet Pulp on a dry weight measurement may appear to have a higher caloric count than an average dry first cut hay the challenge is the consumption rate that would be needed to increase weight gain. A combination of this healthy, digestible fibre source known as beet pulp can be added in addition to higher caloric nutrients to reach your weight gain goal.

These are just a few of the many myths surrounding equine nutrition. Remember to keep a critical mind, get information from credible sources, and, don't forget that agronomists are the experts in animal nutrition!