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## HAY! POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN FEEDING

**"Make all feed changes slowly" has been ingrained in management practises for many years and is the golden rule that most adhere to when it comes to concentrates. However, it's not widely known that the same principle also applies to changing hay and even grazing? The reason for always making slow changes is to help reduced the risk of conditions, such as colic, that can cause digestive upset. Unfortunately, things don't always work out as planned and it may be that a quick switch needs to be made.**

### Changing Hay Type

Even with a good hay supply, some health conditions might necessitate a change in hay type. For instance, switching to Lucerne may help a horse with gastric ulcers. As it's been shown that Lucerne hay has an acid-buffering capacity which helps to increase stomach pH and assist in ulcer management. Other changes may include needing to change from a high starch hay such as Oat hay due to Laminitis, a condition needing lower levels of starch and sugar.

Although more typical when making sudden changes in concentrates, colic risk increases when hay type is changed. Among all the feed changes studied in horses, those to hay type remain the most significant. The Equine Infectious Disease Laboratory at the Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, noted horses "experiencing a change in hay type were

almost 10 times more likely to colic in a study of 1,030 colic cases than equal numbers of controls. The most common colic causes associated with changes in hay type include impaction or changes in microflora altering pH or volatile fatty acid production"

### Changing hay Batch/Supplier

The best advice in this situation is blend as much as possible. We would recommend trying to mix in new hay with old hay over several days to gradually transition over, if able, a hay net will help blend the two and stop horses from sorting and wasting.

If you must stretch hay, save the best-quality hay for growing horses, veteran horses, and those prone to digestive upset in order for them to have the longest transition from old to new hay.

### Completely out of hay and can't transition?

Feed smaller amounts more often. Spread the new hay into small frequent meals spaced throughout the day. Always ensure the horse has access to plenty of water, and avoid other situations that could increase the risk of colic, such as transportation and/or heavy exercise, during the changeover.

### Consider including a Forage alternative long term.

Lack of supply can be an issue and if changing hay type or supplier happens often, consider looking at incorporating alternative forages sources to stretch hay supplies. Forage alternatives include hay cubes, hay pellets, and roughage "Cubix".

These are not there to replace hay completely but keeping some in the diet long term allows for an increase in the amount fed should hay supplies become low and need to be stretched to allow for a careful transition. This means the horse's system becomes used to them and therefore you can quickly increase without concern. Discuss your horse's diet with a nutritionist first as the diet will need to be altered to incorporate these products without adverse effect. If possible, the alternative forage should be the same hay type as the hay, so if Teff is used look for a product containing quality Teff.

### Things to consider when choosing a hay

When choosing the type of hay to purchase for the winter, it is always wise not only to choose the type your horse prefers, but also one that matches his nutritional needs. All horses have different nutritional needs and thus the amount and type of hay they need may be very different.

### But how do I know what I am Buying?

Simply looking at a bale of hay will not indicate nutritional value, however there are a few things to look out for which can indicate good value hay:

#### Colour

Hay should be green in colour, with a pleasant aroma. A very sickly smell can indicate overheating and is to be avoided. Avoid hays that are more "straw" like in colour, as this can indicate excessive sun exposure. This will reduce the hay's nutritional value in terms of vitamins and minerals. Brown hay should also be avoided as it can indicate rain damage.

#### Leaf to Stem Ratio

Another way to assess hay is to look at the leaves and stems. The leaves have a higher level of digestible nutrients than the stems and thus a larger leaf content is desirable. If the hay has a higher proportion of rough, thick stems and a very low leaf content, it generally points towards a less nutritious batch.

### Harvesting

The biggest variable affecting nutrient content within a type of hay is the stage of maturity at harvest (cut). Very early cut hay often has a soft texture, is very leafy, and has a high nutrient density and palatability. These grasses are good for those horses with a higher nutrient need. Mid maturity hays are the most suitable for the average horse as they contain a good combination of leaf and stems while still being palatable.

Plants harvested in late maturity will have coarse, thick stems and less leaf. The older the plant at the time of cutting, the lower the nutrient value and the palatability, meaning fussy eaters may not take well to this cut. However, this type of hay can be a more desirable feed source for horses' with lower nutrient requirements because the horses can eat more hay to satisfy their appetites without becoming overweight.

### Availability

Local availability often influences the popularity of a variety of hay in a geographical area. If a regular supply can't be guaranteed then rather choose one that will be readily available.

### Bale size

Does this really matter when selecting a grass? The answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. Largely it depends on the amount of horses being fed. Small square bales are generally the most ideal in situations where only a few horses are being fed. The bales can be used quickly, reducing the chances of spoiling due to storage. These bales are often easier to store and don't take up as much space. They are easy to handle and can be divided by the slice.

Large round bales, however, need more storage space and can often be difficult to use, as they must be unwound, making filling hay nets harder. More wastage occurs as quite often the outer layers are not suitable for feeding and must be discarded. Large bales stored in a dry barn can be used successfully, however, if they are not stored correctly, they can be susceptible to mould due to their compact nature. Large round bales should be used in situations where there are enough horses to use up the bale in a few days. When a round bale is in a paddock with only one or two horses, it will be exposed to the elements for an extended period, reducing the nutritional value of the hay as well as making it susceptible to rotting or moulding.

### Contaminants

Most important of all, is that the hay is clean and free of weeds and field contaminations (such as tin cans, twine etc). Hay that is mouldy or dusty should not be fed to horses, even when the amount of mould or dust appears to be minor.

Moulds and fungi produce mycotoxins in soils, grains, and forages and once produced, they are generally very stable and will persist for a long-time. Horses that eat hay contaminated by mycotoxins could



suffer from a variety of issues. Mycotoxins inhibit protein synthesis, which can negatively affect the horse's physiology and ability to function and repair.

Moulds that produce mycotoxins are visible on contaminated feed. However, mycotoxins themselves cannot be seen by eye. Mycotoxins can still be present even after the mould dies or falls off. "Moulds can be classified as either field fungi, which grow on plants while they are still rooted in the ground, or storage fungi, which develop after plants are harvested and stored. Field fungi require high moisture conditions (20-21% moisture), while storage moulds can grow at lower moisture levels (13-18%). Forage and feed producers and property managers should monitor both moisture and temperature levels carefully, so they can be aware of the potential for mycotoxin-producing moulds to form" (Holland, 2014).

It is almost impossible to find grain, pasture, and hay that is completely mould- and mycotoxin-free. However, when tested the levels present should be well below dangerous levels. So instead of trying to eliminate mycotoxins, efforts should be aimed at minimizing exposure. Generally, harmful levels of mycotoxins are not often seen. In addition, most horses will avoid mouldy hay because they are not palatable.

If a horse inadvertently eats mouldy hay it's unlikely that they would become ill from a single exposure, but owner's should monitor the horse for signs of digestive upset. General signs of mycotoxin exposure include appetite loss, weight loss, respiratory issues, increased susceptibility to infectious diseases (poor immune function), and poor growth rate.

## TESTIMONIALS

Hi there

***I wanted to say a huge thank you to Equus.  
Look how beautiful our boy is!***

He has picked up loads of weight and is really starting to build on his topline. His temperament has remained even throughout which is fantastic.

We are extremely happy with the results we have seen.

Thanks so much

**Melissa**



**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

Magical Dreamer is fed on Train n Leisure