



What to do if your horse or pony can't, or won't, eat forage



forage replacement



Dietary fibre is essential to well-being but what can you feed if your horse or pony can't or won't eat hay, haylage or grass?

The Problem

Loss of Appetite

Some horses lose their appetite as training intensity increases or due to the stresses of competition and reduced forage intake is only likely to compound problems as gut health is compromised. These horses are likely to under-perform, struggle to maintain condition and be prone to gastric and digestive issues.

Dental Issues

Diastemas (abnormal spaces between the teeth), or the loss of teeth as a horse ages, may eventually mean a horse can no longer safely manage to eat long fibre. Early signs of this can include quidding (where the horse will drop semi-chewed balls of feedstuff), eating slowly, foul breath, hyper-salivation (excessive saliva production), progressive weight loss, loose droppings and long fibre in the droppings (generally speaking, the fibre in droppings should be shorter than 1.5cm). If problems persist unmanaged, there is increased risk of choke and a significant increase in the risk of impaction colic.

Partial Forage Replacement

For working horses and those with milder dental issues who are consuming some long fibre (hay/haylage), it may only be necessary to offer fibre alternatives to partly replace the forage portion of the ration.

Total Forage Replacement

Total forage replacement is suitable for those that can no longer safely manage long

fibre. Pasture can often be managed for a longer period than hay and haylage, providing there are no problems with the incisors.

How much to feed

The total forage and concentrate ration should weigh the equivalent of 1.5 to 2.5% of bodyweight, depending on workload and whether you are looking to achieve weight loss (1.5%), weight gain (2.5%) or to maintain the current condition (2%). You will know how much concentrate you are giving so you then need to work out how much forage your horse is actually consuming.

For example, for a 500kg horse at rest, aiming to maintain the current weight and condition, needs 2% of 500kg = 10kg (dry weight) per day.



Hay/Haylage

Do this by weighing the hay/haylage you give each day then weighing what is left each day so that you can calculate what has been eaten.

Grazing

You can use a relatively crude method of estimating grass intake, depending on turnout time. For example, if a 500kg horse is grazing for 6 hours (0.25 of a day), we would calculate the intake (2%) multiplied by the bodyweight then multiplied by the time spent grazing - 0.25 (2% x 500) = 2.5 kg of grass dry matter.

The amount of forage replacement product to feed is calculated on a (dry) weight for weight basis. So for our 500kg horse requiring a total ration (forage + concentrate) of 10kg per day:

$$10\text{kg} - (\text{total forage actually consumed} + \text{concentrate ration}) = \text{Forage replacement kg}$$

What to Feed?

This very much depends on the chewing capabilities of the horse in question.

- For those horses who need to control starch and sugar intake, check the labels and look for unmolassed products. Be wary of dried grass products as these are naturally higher in sugar.
- Most “fibre feeds” and forage replacers are not fortified with vitamins and minerals so can be fed safely alongside the horse’s current bucket feed without causing an imbalance in mineral intake
- Soaked or easily water-softened products can be beneficial to increase moisture intake, which may help counteract some of the risks of gut function compromise in the older and/or dentally-challenged horse
- Where possible, you should provide a combination of two or three fibre alternatives to add variety, particularly for those stabled more.
- If the horse can manage a suitable chaff, always feed one as it will occupy the horse for longer than a soaked feed or cube.

How to Feed?

The aim is to encourage consumption while helping to occupy the horse, as eating long fibre would do. Horses have a psychological need to chew, and saliva produced when chewing helps to buffer acid in the gut – if they are left for long periods of time without the opportunity to chew, this can affect their behaviour and may have a negative effect on gut function.

- Feed forage replacers separately from the horse’s concentrate ration.
- If a horse is likely to consume them in one go, divide the fibre alternatives offered over as many meals as possible. In any case, give them no fewer than three times per day.
- Alternatively, give forage replacers in bigger buckets to graze on during the day/night in the stable/field.
- Chaffs can be fed in separate buckets or mixed with soaked Fibre-Beet or Speedi-Beet.
- Remember to weigh/measure all soaked feeds when dry, before soaking.
- Splitting the fibre replacement offered into a number of buckets spread around the stable or paddock will encourage natural foraging behaviour, slow down eating and occupy the horse for longer.

Other Considerations

Careful monitoring of weight and condition on a regular basis is essential for all horses. Using a weighttape can often indicate changes earlier than visual assessment alone thus allowing feed and management to be adjusted accordingly. As a general rule you should be able to feel the ribs but not see them. However bear in mind during the winter months this can be obscured by a thick winter coat.

As partially or fully replacing the forage ration can present quite a challenge, please do not hesitate to contact our Nutrition team for further advice.

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Which Products to Feed?

Product	Easy Chew	Need some chewing	Starch level	Sugar level	Calorie level	Suitable for Total/Partial Replacement
Light Chaff Alfalfa & oat straw with mint		✓	2.5%	2.25%	8 MJ/kg	Total
Natural Meadow Cobs Pre-Alpine meadow grasses		✓	2.2%	7.8%	6 MJ/kg	Total
Alfalfa Blend Alfalfa, green oat straw		✓	3.75%	7.5%	9 MJ/kg	Partial
Alfalfa Plus Oil Alfalfa with soya oil		✓	3%	2.5%	12.5 MJ/kg	Partial
Speedi-Beet Unmolassed beet pulp	✓		Trace	5%	11 MJ/kg	Partial
Fibre-Beet Unmolassed beet pulp & alfalfa	✓		3%	5%	12 MJ/kg	Total
Ultra Grass Pure dried grass		✓	1%	11%	10.5 MJ/kg	Partial
Fibre Plus Nuggets Delicious, chunky fibre source	✓ [when soaked]		10%	8%	8.5 MJ/kg	Partial

