HONEYCHOP

Six Top Tips for Equine Gastrointestinal Wellness

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The way in which we chose to feed our horses can make a difference to our horse's health, especially their gastrointestinal health. In this article we discover top tips to reduce a horse's risk of illness or injury to their gut which can help to improve their wellbeing.

1. Feeding little and often:

Horses have evolved to trickle feed, so it is important that we aim to give them high fibre forage and feeds for as many hours of the day as possible. This can be achieved with forage such as hay and haylage, but we should also think about the feeds that we give. They should be high in fibreto encourage horses eat their feeds slowly. It is also helpful to encourage extra chewing (such as using short-chopped fibre rather than pellets or mixes) as this increases the amount of saliva that mixes with food as it travels down to a horse's stomach.

Sometimes we need to restrict a horse's calorie intake to help them to lose weight, or maintain a healthy weight. In these cases, we can try to slow their intake of forage by using double-haynets or other slow feeding balls/rings and bars.

Small-holed or double haynets are a great way to slow forage intake.

2. Make gradual changes to feeding and forage:

A horse's large intestines and caecum contain large numbers of healthy microbes (bacteria, yeasts etc.) that are essential for generating fuel for their body. These microbes digest fibre and produce molecules that a horse's body uses for energy. As part of the process the microbes produce gases. The helpful microbe populations in the bowel get disrupted because of medicines, or higher starch/sugar feeds, or changes to the usual feed and forage that is given. This disruption to the usual microbes in the bowel can lead to build up of gas, indigestion, inflammation and potentially colic. When we change a horse's diet slowly (over a few weeks), the gut microbe population can adjust, without increasing the risk of colic or intestinal upset (Curtis et al., 2019). Keep an eye on the ingredients lists too – look for feeds that are precise and clear about their ingredients, rather than using vague terms such as cereal straw.

TOP TIP:
Choose feeds that list specific ingredients, not vague terms like "cereal straw."

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3. Communicate your horse's usual forage and feeding patterns: especially when more than one person looks after a horse. Scientific studies of colic risk show that colic is more likely the greater number of people are responsible for feeding and caring for a horse(Archer et al., 2008). Perhaps this is linked to unexpected changes in feeding patterns. To reduce this risk, keep a detailed record of your horse's usual feeding plan especially if different people feed your horse from one day to the next.

4. Keep starch and sugar intake as low as possible

Take a look at the nutritional analysis label on your horse's feeds. It should be easy to spot the starch and sugars and they are usually written as a %. A golden rule of feeding horses to promote gut health and reduce the risk of colic, gastric ulcers, metabolic syndrome, and laminitis is to keep the amount of starch and sugar to less than 10% (Galinelli et al., 2021). If you are not sure if your feeds are suitable, you can ask your vet to check with you. We can make up a horse's daily energy needs through fibre and oil-based diets, rather than getting calories from starches and sugar, so your horse will be able to maintain their weight, and build muscle and fitness for whichever activities and competitions you chose to do with them.

5. When we restrict the diet make sure to add a diet balancer

When we soak forage (which is useful for reducing the soluble sugars in it), or feed high fibre diets, it is important to make sure that the essential vitamins and minerals and daily protein needs are met. Especially when we soak forage for a few hours, water-soluble vitamin levels can be substantially reduced. We can easily ensure the diet has suitable amounts of vitamins, minerals and protein by adding a diet balancer, which is usually added to a horse's usual daily feed.

6. Feed before exercise

Gastric ulceration (similar to peptic ulcers and heartburn in people) can be exacerbated by exercising on a relatively empty stomach. Although traditional rules on feeding horses used to say not to feed before exercise, feeding them prior to exercise is actually a safe and helpful thing to do.When the stomach is fairly empty, damaging acidic digestive juices may splash onto the top half of the stomach which can lead to gastric ulceration. Simple ways to keep the stomach topped up before exercise could include offering a small haynet but sometimes horses are excited to be ridden and don't eat this well. It is often more effective to feed a couple of scoops of short-chopped fibre such as non-molassed chaff.

TOP TIP:
Feed a couple of scoops of chaff before exercise, to reduce the risk of gastric ulceration.

In summary, the way we feed our horses can be optimised to reduce the risk of disease and promote gastrointestinal wellness.

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