



Link Between Equine Diet and Behavior Explored

by: Liz Brown

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Diet and stable management play a major role in horse behavior, according to researchers from the University of Bristol.

"There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that the more you can mimic the almost continuous natural grazing behavior of horses in the wild, the better," said study co-author Becky Hothersall, PhD, a researcher studying Equine Learning and Cognition at the University's School of Veterinary Science.

The authors found horses fed more hay displayed generally quieter behavior, and fewer stereotypic behaviors (such as cribbing or weaving), compared to horses fed infrequent and large high-starch meals.

"More time spent eating less nutrient-rich food is likely to fulfill your horse's instincts to forage, and may reduce digestive problems or blood sugar fluctuations associated with large meals," Hothersall said.

The study noted that after a horse ingests a large, starchy meal, "the higher proportion of dry matter in the stomach contents slows the mixing of feed and gastric juice ... and can result in discomfort and even gastric colic."

The authors noted some researchers believe cribbing might be a physiological response to help calm gastric upset, and that certain horses might be predisposed to this behavior.

Hothersall said stereotypic behavior is virtually unknown in the wild and suggests increasing turnout and social contact with other horses as a means to possibly prevent such behaviors. As well, the authors suggest using an automatic, timed feeding device to release smaller grain meals at more frequent intervals, as this may reduce some of these behaviors.

Hothersall said more research is needed to understand exactly how diet and management practices influence behavior.

"More studies that begin before stereotypes do are needed to get a better idea of what management, temperament, or physiological factors predispose a horse to developing stereotypes," she said. "When this is understood, we have a more realistic hope of preventing them."

The study, "Role of diet and feeding in normal and stereotypic behaviors in horses," was published in the April 2009 *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Equine Practice*.

**Readers are cautioned to seek the advice of a qualified veterinarian
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