
9 Spring grass facts every horse owner should know
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Spring has finally sprung! While many have sworn by the benefits of “Dr Green” for generations, it’s not without its pitfalls. Knowing the facts can help you decide on the most suitable management for your horse this spring.



1. Calorie overload

Ponies have been seen to consume almost 5% of their bodyweight (dry matter) in grass per day which equates to a whopping 12.5kg for 250kg pony! Spring grass may provide three times the published energy (calorie) requirement for horses and ponies in light work. In fact, a 250kg pony could consume enough energy to fuel a 500kg racehorse (equivalent to over half a bag of conditioning cubes) every day from spring grass alone!

2. Water soluble carbohydrate (WSC) risks

Water soluble carbohydrates (WSC) or "sugar" includes simple sugars and fructan. The majority of simple sugar in grass is sucrose – the same sugar you put in your tea and the main form of sugar in molasses. Fructan is the "storage form" of sugar in the majority of UK grasses. High intakes of WSC may trigger laminitis, colic or in some cases tying up.

3. WSC levels are hard to predict!

WSC levels in grazing are hard to predict and in some situations, may fluctuate by the hour. This is one of the reasons why it may be difficult to predict when the "safest" time to turn out is. WSC levels in grass are affected by many factors including sunlight, moisture/ rainfall, fertiliser application, temperature, soil fertility, grass species and grass maturity. However in general, factors that encourage growth but limit photosynthesis will help to reduce WSC for example, shaded pasture in combination with warm temperatures, sufficient soil moisture and appropriate fertiliser application. On the other hand, environments that increase photosynthesis but limit growth (such as sunny frosty mornings), lead to an increase in WSC.

4. Daily sugar intake

Grass may contain up to 15% simple sugars (dry matter) which means a 250kg pony could consume almost 2kg of simple sugars per day from grass alone. However if you add fructan into mix, total WSC intake could rise to almost 4.5kg!

5. WSC levels may still be high at night!

Provided the weather is warm enough, fructan stored in the stem is used for growth overnight. This, in addition to the fact that grass can't photosynthesise without sunlight, means that WSC levels may be lower at night. However in order for grass to grow, the temperature needs to be consistently above 5°C which means on chilly nights, WSC levels may still be high.

6. Beware of Jack Frost

Sunny frosty mornings are common at this time of year and present a hidden danger for laminitis. When it's too cold for the grass to grow overnight, WSC levels remain high. When the sun comes out this is coupled with photosynthesis and further sugar production, resulting in high levels of WSC.

7. Turnout for short periods may be counterproductive

Although turning out for short periods may seem like a logical way of restricting grass intake, our four-legged friends can soon become wise to such a regime. In one study, ponies were seen to

consume almost 1% of their bodyweight (dry matter) in only 3 hours at grass, despite being fed ad lib hay for the rest of the day. This may equate to two-thirds of the total daily forage allowance for horses and ponies on a weight loss diet.

8. Do grazing muzzles really work?

Grazing muzzles have been shown to reduce intake by approximately 80% in ponies turned out for 3 hours, and reduce the rate of weight gain in some ponies when worn for 10 out of 23 hours at pasture. Muzzles should not be left on 24/7, but some horses and ponies may still gain weight when only wearing a muzzle for part of their time at pasture. Consider stabling or 'non-grass' turn out for the remainder of the day rather than allowing free access to grazing after removing your horse/pony's muzzle. Grazing muzzles may also lead to frustration so monitor your horse's behaviour, weight and body condition score closely. Prolonged use of a muzzle may also cause the horse's teeth to wear unevenly so ensure they are checked regularly by a vet or equine dental technician. Speak to a nutritionist for more advice on how to use a grazing muzzle safely.

9. Laminitis may need to be removed from grazing

Rapid grass growth makes spring a particularly high risk period for laminitis and for those at very high risk, complete removal from grazing may be the only option. In these cases grazing should ideally be replaced with a low NSC hay or an appropriate hay replacer.

For specific advice on managing your horse's grass intake contact the SPILLERS Care-Line on 01908 22 66 26.

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