The benefits of feeding your horse short chopped fibre

Whether it contains straw, alfalfa or grass, with or without molasses, short chopped fibre or ‘chaff’ is a common feature in many feed buckets. In fact, recent market research showed that almost 85% of horse owner’s feed short chopped fibre which is perhaps no surprise given that it may have a number of health and welfare benefits to offer…

Feeding short chop fibre to extend eating time

Recent scientific research has shown that adding at least 15% chaff to meals can significantly increase eating time which helps to support digestive health and mental wellbeing. We all like to see our horse’s enjoying their feed but rapid intake of meals may lead to insufficient chewing, reduced saliva production and food passing through the digestive system too quickly which in turn, may lead to conditions such as choke and colic.

Saliva provides a natural buffer to stomach acid but unlike people, horses only produce saliva when they chew. Having evolved to spend around 16-18 hours per day foraging, horses have a psychological need to chew which means long periods without access forage can increase stress. With this mind, feeding short chopped fibre may be of added benefit for horses on restricted rations of forage.

If your horse is a poor doer, look for fibres high in oil to help maximise the number of calories consumed in every mouthful!

Feeding short chopped fibre to prevent gastric splashing

The horse’s stomach produces acid continuously (although at variable rate). Exercise increases abdominal pressure, causing acid to ‘splash’ on to the stomach lining in the non-glandular region where it increases the risk of ulcers forming. Exercise may also increase acid production.

Feeding short chopped fibre helps to prevent ‘gastric splashing’ by forming a protective ‘fibre mat’ on top of the contents of the stomach. Current advice is to feed 2 litres of short chopped fibre (by volume - equivalent to 1 Stubbs scoop) in the 30 minutes before exercise.

Feeding short chopped fibre to replace compound feed

Short chopped fibres containing a full complement of added vitamins and minerals can be used as a full or partial replacement for mixes and cubes. This is a great way to increase fibre intake, reduce starch intake, extend eating time and provide a balanced diet with just one feed! Just like compound feeds, fibres with added vitamins and minerals need to be fed at the recommended amount in order to provide a balanced diet, so make sure you weigh all feeds at least once to help ensure your feeding the right amount.

Feeding short chopped fibre to replace forage

For most horses, hay or haylage is the ideal way to top up or replace grazing but a forage replacer is often essential for those with dental issues. Some short chopped fibres are suitable for feeding as a full or partial hay replacer, providing essential fibre whilst also helping to fulfil that all important need to chew (horses with very poor teeth will need a mash). Provided they are low in starch and sugar, short chopped fibres are also ideal for laminitics if a low water soluble carbohydrate (WSC) or ‘sugar’ hay cannot be found.

Choosing your short chopped fibre

Ideally choose a short chopped fibre containing alfalfa as the high protein and calcium content is thought to help buffer stomach acid.

- Choose a low-calorie fibre for good doers – this will help you to bulk out the bucket and extend eating time without compromising your horse’s waistline.
- Look for fibres high in oil for poor doers to help extend eating time while maximising the number of calories in every mouthful.
- If you’re already feeding the recommended amount of a suitable compound feed or balancer, there’s no need to choose a chaff with added vitamins and minerals.
- Remember not all ‘chaffs’ and short chopped fibre feeds are suitable for feeding as hay replacers – seek professional advice if you are unsure.

For more advice on feeding short chopped fibre to your horse contact the SPILLERS Care-Line via 01908 226626 or fill in our online consultation form.

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