Feeding Straw to Horses
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When you think about your horse’s forage, your first thought is probably grass, hay or haylage – but not straw. For good doers and those prone to weight gain, straw can be a surprisingly valuable addition to the diet. Not only is it low in calories, it also provides plenty of fibre, keeps your horse chewing for longer, and can be a practical way to help manage bodyweight without leaving your horse short on forage.



## Minimum Forage Intake

If your horse is prone to piling on the pounds, you'll know that free access to forage isn't always appropriate. However, the goal is always to feed **as much forage as possible while still achieving healthy weight loss**.

Total forage intake should **not be restricted to less than 1.5% of current bodyweight on a dry matter basis** (i.e. once we've accounted for the moisture in the feed). On an 'as fed' basis, the amount you weigh out, for a 500kg horse without grazing this works out to approximately:

- **9kg of hay** if fed dry
- **11kg of hay** if soaked before feeding
- **11–12kg of haylage** (possibly more depending on the dry matter content)

If you don't know your horse's weight – or they have access to grazing – monitoring droppings can be a practical way of assessing intake. For weight loss, aim to reduce the number of droppings by about a third initially, but never by more than half.



## Why Feed Straw?

For good doers, replacing part of the forage ration with straw can be a useful strategy because straw is:

- **High in fibre** – which helps maintain digestive health
- **Low in calories** – reduces overall energy (calorie) intake
- **Low in starch & sugar** – suitable for laminitics
- **Encourages chewing** – supports mental wellbeing and increases saliva production
- **Cost effective** – in some cases, a more economical option than hay

For horses with no dental issues, consider replacing up to **30–50% of the forage ration** with straw. This allows you to feed larger amounts of total forage without overloading on calories.

## How to Feed Straw

Like any dietary change, straw needs to be **introduced gradually** to avoid digestive upset. Start by replacing just half a kilo of hay with straw every other day. Always check it's of **good hygienic quality** – bright in colour, free from mould and dust.

Some owners prefer to mix straw with hay to ensure it’s accepted, while others feed it separately. Horses vary in how readily they take to it, with oat straw generally considered the most palatable, followed by barley and wheat straw.

## Extending eating time

Straw can also be a useful way to make your horse’s forage last longer:

- Divide forage into **multiple smaller servings** – research has shown horses fed forage three times a day had a lower risk of gastric ulcers than those fed only twice.
- Use **double-layered small-holed haynets** – one study found this extended eating time by two hours per night compared to feeding the same ration in a single net.

## Don’t Forget the Balancer

Cutting calories shouldn’t mean cutting nutrients. Forage-only diets can be short of key nutrients such as copper, zinc, selenium, vitamin E, and lysine. That’s where a **balancer** comes in.

Balancers are designed to be fed in small amounts, providing your horse with essential vitamins, minerals, and quality protein – all without adding significant calories, starch, or sugar. For good doers, this makes them the ideal partner to a forage-based diet, especially one that includes straw.

## FAQs About Feeding Straw to Horses

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1. ### Can all horses eat straw?

   Not necessarily. Horses with **dental issues** or a **history of colic** may not be suitable candidates for straw. Always consult your vet or equine dental technician if you’re unsure.

2. **Can I feed straw to my good doer who is prone to gastric ulcers?**

   In once recent study, there was no increased association between feeding straw and gastric ulcers. For horses who need to avoid long periods of time without food straw ideal for extending eating time.

3. **Which type of straw is best?**
   - **Oat straw** – usually the most palatable.
   - **Barley straw** – palatable, but can sometimes have awns (beards) which may cause irritation.
   - **Wheat straw** – generally less palatable but often more widely available.

   Ultimately, the most important factor is **quality** – clean, bright, and mould-free.

4. **Should I soak straw?**

   There's **no need to soak straw for sugar reduction** as its water-soluble carbohydrate (WSC) content is already low (around 6–7%). However, a short soak can help reduce dust and spores, or improve palatability for fussy eaters.

5. **Can straw be steamed?**

   Yes! Steaming straw can improve its hygienic quality and palatability, and reduce respirable dust, mould spores, and bacteria – making it particularly useful for horses with respiratory issues.

6. **How much straw should I feed?**

   **30–50% of the total forage ration** can be replaced with straw for horses with no dental problems. Always introduce gradually and monitor droppings and condition closely.


# Join the Slimmers' Club

Managing a good doer can feel like a constant balancing act – but you don't have to do it alone. The SPILLERS Slimmers' Club is a free community of like-minded horse owners all working towards the same goal: healthier, happier horses.

With over 13,500 members, the club offers:

- Support from our nutrition specialists
- Tips and tools for managing weight
- Success stories from owners just like you
- Motivation to stay on track

Join Now

# Speak to a Nutrition Specialist

If you’re considering adding straw to your horse’s diet or simply want tailored advice for your individual horse, our friendly team of nutrition specialists are here to help.

 Call us on **01908 226626** (Mon–Fri, 9am–5pm)
 Or fill in our Care-Line enquiry form

We’ll work with you to create a balanced diet plan that supports weight management without compromising your horse’s health or happiness.

## Key Takeaway

Feeding straw isn’t about cutting corners – it’s about **cutting calories, not nutrients**. With the right balance of hay, straw, and a balancer, you can help your horse stay healthy, occupied, and on track with their weight goals.

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