
Safe feed ingredients for horses: Debunking common myths

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Fearmongering and confusion

With so much conflicting information and advice out there, choosing a feed can seem harder than ever.

- “Don’t feed alfalfa - your horse will go crazy.”
- “Don’t feed anything with molasses - it’s way too high in sugar.”
- “Don’t give a laminitic a balancer - it’s too high in calories.”
- “Don’t feed XYZ if your horse has ulcers.” “No, DO feed XYZ if your horse has ulcers!”

Statements like these cause us owners to wonder what on earth we should feed our horses. Many of the feeds which claim to be “suitable for laminitics” include ingredients we’re sometimes concerned about. Why would leading feed companies be making such poor recipes? In short, they’re not! Most of the ingredients used today have been successfully included in horse feeds for decades for their great benefits.

The problem with the advice above and many similar dogmatic statements is that they either miss the details, are based on individual experiences or are simply misinformation.

Remember - evaluate ALL the information and apply logic - don't let fearmongering dictate your horse's nutrition.

Is alfalfa ok to feed my horse?

There is a heap of confusion surrounding alfalfa, and a lot of people unfairly demonise alfalfa when in reality it's a superb, highly nutritious feed for horses.

A few years back there was a lot of misinterpretation and scaremongering following a couple of research studies. In both studies the horses were fed large amounts of alfalfa – not comparable to real life UK feeding practices – and important details in the findings were overlooked by some. Having sifted through these details carefully, many nutritionists noted the nuances and continued to sing its benefits. Alfalfa is also widely used as an ingredient in BETA® EGUS (Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome) approved feeds. Recent research (Grimm et al 2026) backs up the fact chopped alfalfa has natural stomach acid buffering capability. When chopped alfalfa was compared to pelleted and refined alfalfa all 3 were found to have positive effects on the gastric system with chopped alfalfa likely to present the greatest support for a healthy gastric environment.

Alfalfa is high in fibre, contains quality protein and is low in both sugar and starch making it a sympathetic calorie source for those prone to laminitis or over excitability. This non-heating fibre rich feed is an excellent choice for feed companies to include in their ingredients list.

Do some horses do better with an alfalfa free diet? Sure, every horse is individual. But for the vast majority it's proven over decades to help support healthy digestion and provide alternative calories and quality protein sources to cereals for those needing more than forage or grazing can provide.

Read more: [Alfalfa chaff and gastric ulcers](#)

Will molasses make my horse excitable? Is molasses safe to feed a laminitic?

Rest assured, in small amounts molasses is absolutely fine to feed a laminitic (or a horse prone to gastric ulcers). Non-structural carbohydrate (NSC or 'sugar and starch') intake is considered a primary nutritional driver for laminitis risk. You need to consider the total amount of sugar and starch in the horse's diet from *everything* they eat rather than worry about specific ingredients.

Plenty of well formulated feeds on the market contain molasses to make the feed more palatable - after all there's no point making a feed if horses and ponies don't want to eat it nor enjoy it! - but the overall sugar level in the feed often remains low and has no negative effect on your horse's wellbeing or behaviour.

Remember horses have a naturally sweet tooth from primarily eating grasses! Most mainstream feeds including molasses contain approximately 4-6% sugar and only a portion of this comes from molasses. This is often lower than sugar levels typically found in forage or grass which may contain up to 15% sugar and makes up a far larger portion of the diet. If you're concerned or confused about sugar, [contact our experienced Care-Line team](#) who can help answer your specific questions.

Read more: [The truth about molasses](#)



What feeds should I avoid for gastric ulcers?

When feeding a horse or pony prone to Equine Gastric Ulcers Syndrome (EGUS) it's important to assess their whole diet alongside management, routine and other potential 'stress factors'.

- Feed them as much long stem fibre as possible - based on their body condition. This encourages chewing and increases saliva production, your horse's natural stomach acid buffer.
- Straw does **not** increase the risk of gastric ulcers, when fed as part of a suitable diet. It could be a useful low-calorie choice for extending eating time (and chewing) for good doers.
- Molasses is sometimes mentioned as one to avoid for gastric ulcers although there is no scientifically proven evidence to suggest it's of any concern and many feeds suitable for horses prone to gastric ulcers include molasses.
- Avoiding cereals, or cereal based compound feeds high in starch helps maintain a happier environment in the stomach as well as the rest of the digestive system.

Ensure your horse has a nutritionally balanced diet to help them thrive and if they need more calories than forage and a balancer alone can provide opt for compound feeds high in fibre and oil but low in sugar and starch.

Read more: [Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome – SPILLERS need to know guide](#)

Consider the total amounts fed!

When it comes to sugar or calories or protein – or any nutrient/ ingredient - always look at the total amount of the food eaten per day and per meal rather than solely relying on percentages written on the feed bag label. Percentages can give a useful guide, but they are only a part of the puzzle.

When choosing feeds (as opposed to forage) for those prone to laminitis, it's the amount of non-structural carbohydrate (NSC) or 'starch and sugar' provided per meal that's most important. Restricting amounts to **less than 250g of sugar and starch per meal for a 500kg horse** (adjusted to the individuals weight) should be a suitable guide provided they are not severely insulin dysregulated

It's all about the numbers - here's the maths:

Remember, 10% of 100 = 10 and 20% of 50 also = 10!

It's the total amount per day or per meal rather than the percentage of a nutrient in the feed which is most important.

The table below illustrates how the total intake of sugar and protein is determined by the feeding rate, not just the percentage:

Portion size for a 500kg horse	% simple sugar	Sugar per serving	% crude protein	Protein per serving
500g SPILLERS Lite & Lean Balancer	3	15g	18	90g
3kgs SPILLERS High Fibre Cubes	4.5	135g	10	300g
3kgs SPILLERS Performance Mix	5.5	165g	13	390g

3kgs SPILLERS Perform & Restore Mash	2.5	75g	13	390g
3kgs SPILLERS Ulca Fibre	4	120g	15	450g
6kg hay (by dry matter)	5 - 25	300g – 1.5kg	5-11	300g – 1.1kg

Quick links

Occasionally owners worry that balancers are high in protein (typically 15-32%) compared to cubes or mixes (8-16%). However, because a balancer is fed in such small quantities (e.g. just 500g per day for a 500kg horse), the actual amount of sugar/protein your horse consumes is far less than they would get from a full ration of cubes. This is because the cubes are designed to be fed in a larger amount to horses and ponies who need more calories to support a healthy body condition.

Balancers are designed to be fed in small amounts to good doers and are strategically formulated to supply the nutrients needed to balance forage and grazing, while providing negligible calories.

Read more: [Enhancing wellbeing through a balanced diet](#)

Why quality of protein matters

Feeding 500g of SPILLERS Lite & Lean Balancer provides 90g of protein per day, far less than a hay net would, but the balancer guarantees a concentrated source of quality protein. By **‘quality protein’ we refer to the profile of amino acids** included. Amino acids are the building blocks of protein, and some are essential meaning they must be supplied by the diet as the horse cannot make them itself. Hay can be very variable in both the amount of protein but also the quality of protein. When we analyse forage, we see low levels of protein fairly often.

Horses being fed a ‘lite’ balancer may also be on a carefully controlled overall diet, i.e. getting minimal grazing access, carefully weighed out hay and so receiving less in the way of quality protein compared to those with free access to forage/ grass. Balancers providing high levels of lysine, the essential amino acid which is most likely to be deficient in the diet, help to maintain muscle mass. Cutting calories shouldn’t mean cutting nutrients nor losing important muscle mass. A lack of quality protein could also affect a horses energy levels as they simply don’t have enough ‘tools’ to train and recover correctly.

Read more: [Maintaining energy for good doers](#)

Read more: [Create that winning topline](#)

Take Home Message:

Remember quantities matter - most diabetic people can happily enjoy a square or two of chocolate but should avoid eating a whole bar.

Did you know? Even water, vital for life, can be harmful if consumed to excess – that doesn't make it bad! Similarly for most humans nuts are a great food containing beneficial nutrients, but for the few who are truly allergic, even tiny amounts can have serious consequences!

At **SPILLERS**, our formulations are led by global equine nutrition experts who heading up our nutrition research and sifting through scientific literature to help us ensure your horse receives safe, balanced, and premium-quality nutrition.

So, with all that in mind, it's important to avoid scaremongering claims, apply logic and science, look at the whole picture and treat every horse as an individual.



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Author summary:

Vanessa has been part of the SPILLERS nutrition team for over a decade and writes evidence-based, practical feeding advice to help owners support their horses' health, wellbeing and long-term condition.

Frequently Asked Questions

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1. **Why do you include by-products such as wheatfeed in horse feeds?**

Wheatfeed, and oatfeed, are excellent sources of fibre for horses. **A product not**

used by one industry can be really beneficial for another and in a sustainable world it's more important than ever not waste or discard items or label them a 'by-product' when they can be so useful elsewhere. Horses have successfully been fed wheatfeed and oatfeed for decades and they are valuable ingredients.

2. **How do I know if my horse is allergic to alfalfa or another ingredient?**

Although commonly suspected, true feed allergies in horses are in fact very rare and when true feed allergies do occur, they are usually in response to a specific type of protein. Unfortunately, allergy tests in horses are unreliable so if a feed allergy is suspected, an elimination diet is the best option. This involves removing all feed from the diet for at least 4-6 weeks and monitoring the 'reaction'. If it stops/ disappears, individual feeds or ingredients need to be reintroduced one at a time for a period of 2-3 weeks to see if the reaction comes back; this stage is essential to rule out the possibility of coincidence.

3. **Does my horse need any feed at all? Can't they just eat grass and hay?**

Technically yes of course, but that doesn't guarantee they'll receive a balanced diet. UK grass and forages are hugely variable in their nutritional content and therefore for most horses and ponies feeding either a full ration of compound feed, balancer or a vitamin and mineral supplement is the best way to ensure they receive all the nutrients they need to thrive long term.

4. **Should I be worried about any ingredients used in horse feeds?**

Feed ingredients used today by reputable feed companies have been carefully chosen for their benefits and used effectively for decades. Feed manufacturers in the UK who are accredited to the BETA® NOPS (Natural and Other Prohibited Substances) scheme follow very strict manufacturing processes which ensure that high quality and safety standards are met at every step of the way of your horse's feed production. These processes are of particular importance for horses competing under affiliated rules but should provide all horse owners with peace of mind we're voluntarily working under strict industry guidelines. At SPILLERS we are totally transparent about the ingredients in all our feeds and supplements and declare information clearly on our website.

Personalised Support When You Need It

Our nutrition specialists are available to offer tailored advice, ensuring you get the most from your horse's diet.

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