9 Sugar beet facts every horse owner should know

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When the leaves turn autumnal and we’re putting our coats on again in the mornings, as horse owners we know it’s time to buckle up - winter is on its way. Wellies and rug changing become a staple again and many of us might make a few changes to our feed rooms. Sugar beet often reappears as that good old trusty winter staple, but what do we know about it?

Sugar beet has been fed to horses for over half a century. In recent years it’s evolved to become a reliable ingredient used in many popular mashes, not just fed as a straight feed. Is it fattening? Is it full of sugar? Do I really have to soak it for 24 hours? As horse owners ourselves, we want to be clear too. So, let’s share a few facts to clear up any confusion.



1. It’s not actually a sweet treat.

Sugar beet is a root vegetable, a bit like a parsnip, that’s grown all over the UK. The sugar extracted from it is the very same that ends up in our tea and cakes. For our horses, we feed the useful fibrous pulp which us humans don’t need. It’s a fantastic example of it being a co-product - creating something incredibly nutritious for our four-legged friends.

2. Meet the ‘super fibre’.

We often hear sugar beet called a ‘super fibre’, and for good reason. Its fibre is highly digestible, meaning your horse can get more goodness out of every mouthful. This fibre is broken down by the good bacteria in your horse’s hindgut and provide a brilliant source of slow-release energy. That makes it great for helping maintain condition and fuelling work, without the fizzy behaviour sometimes associated with cereals.

3. Surprisingly low in sugar!

This is the fact that surprises many people. Because the sugar has been extracted for human use, unmolassed sugar beet is actually very low in sugar (around 5%) and starch (less than 2%). This makes it a great option for horses and ponies who need a low starch and sugar diet, such as those prone to laminitis. It provides energy without the risks associated with high-starch grains. Just be sure you're buying unmolassed beet; some versions have molasses added back in, which will increase the sugar content.

4. Soaking is essential.

Unprocessed sugar beet comes in dry, hard pellets or shreds which swell dramatically when you add water. If a horse were to eat it dry, this expansion could happen inside the digestive system creating a serious risk of choke or colic. Soaking times can vary from 10 minutes to 24 hours depending on the product, so our best advice is to always read the instructions on the bag. If in doubt, it’s better to add more water than not enough!

5. Fresh is always best.

Once soaked, sugar beet can start to ferment, especially in warmer weather. You’ll know it’s ‘turned’ by its sour smell. Fermented feed can lead to digestive upset, so it’s always best avoided. In the summer, opt for a quick-soaking product and make up smaller batches when you need them. In winter, you have a bit more leeway but feeding as soon as it’s ready after soaking is the gold standard for freshness.

6. The truth about it being 'conditioning'.

While sugar beet is a great source of calories in its dry form, it's often not as "conditioning" as its reputation suggests. The reason is the water. Once soaked, sugar beet is around 85% water and of course, water is calorie free. A big bucket looks like a lot of feed but may not contain as many calories as you think. To put it in perspective, a Stubbs scoop of dry Horse and Pony Cubes could easily have four to five times more calories than a scoop of soaked sugar beet. It’s a brilliant way to add volume and hydration to a meal, but if you’re trying to build condition, you need to be mindful of the dry weight you are feeding.

7. A helping hand for the good doer.

It might seem odd, but unmolassed sugar beet can be a useful tool for managing the weight of a good doer. A small amount, say a 250g mug (measured dry)—soaks up to a good volume and can make a token balancer ration feel like a proper meal. It helps keep horses and ponies satisfied without adding any significant calories to their diet, and it’s a great way to hide supplements, too. With lower calorie mashes available these days too there’s an option for all.

8. A soft option for sensitive mouths.

For our senior horses or those with poor teeth who struggle to chew hay or haylage, soaked sugar beet can be a lifesaver. It provides a highly digestible, easy-to-eat source of fibre that helps keep their gut moving and maintains condition. It can be used as a partial hay replacer – if you’re considering this route, we’d always recommend having a chat with a nutritionist to get the balance just right for your horse's individual needs.

9. It’s not a complete feed.

On its own, sugar beet is low in essential minerals like copper, zinc, and selenium, and it contains no added vitamins. That's why it's important to remember it’s part of a balanced diet rather than rely on it alone. Always ensure your horse is also getting a compound feed, a balancer, or a broad-spectrum vitamin and mineral supplement to cover all their nutritional bases.

Here at SPILLERS, we’ve crafted our own range of mashes that utilise the goodness of sugar beet and add in everything else your horse needs. All our mashes are fully balanced with vitamins and minerals, contain added pre- and probiotics for digestive health, and have a delicious apple aroma your horse will love. They’re also super quick to prepare making them a time saving option suitable to feed all year round.

Need a Helping Hand?

Every horse’s feeding plan and management is different. If you are worried about your horse's weight, need help calculating feeding rates, or would like a completely tailored diet plan, our dedicated nutrition advisors are here to support you.

Get in touch with our **SPILLERS Care-Line on 01908 226626** or fill in our online consultation form for free, friendly, and expert advice.

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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.

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1. ### Can I use hot water to soak my sugar beet in the winter?

   Yes, absolutely! Soaking with warm or hot water can help speed up the soaking time on freezing winter days, and it creates a lovely, warm mash which some horses find comforting. Just make sure the feed has cooled down enough before offering it to your horse.

2. ### How can I tell if my soaked sugar beet has gone bad?

   Use your nose! Freshly soaked sugar beet has a sweet smell. If it has started to ferment, it will smell distinctly sour, acidic, or like vinegar/alcohol. If you smell this, discard the batch and rinse your buckets thoroughly before soaking a fresh portion. This goes for any other feeds or forage too.

3. ### Does feeding sugar beet cause “fizzy” behavior?

   Unmolassed sugar beet is highly unlikely to cause fizzy behavior. Because it is

extremely low in starch and sugar, the energy it provides is released slowly through hindgut fermentation. Cereal grains, which are high in starch, are typically the culprit behind fizzy behaviour.

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