# Can Alfalfa Help Horses With Gastric Ulcers? Benefits, Myth-Busting, and Scientific Insights

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Alfalfa has unfairly been the cause of confusion and demonised by some fractions of the equine community, largely due to the misinterpretation of science and misinformation.

Whilst it won’t suit every horse, for the majority alfalfa is a popular and highly beneficial feed for horses. Far from being a trigger for excitability or laminitis, alfalfa is a naturally low-sugar, nutrient-rich super-fibre. There is much science to prove it supports digestive health, it provides high-quality protein for muscle development, and acts as an excellent source of slow-release calories.



## Setting the Record Straight: Why the old studies caused confusion

Much of the modern hesitation around feeding alfalfa stems from two back in 2016 and 2017. When these papers were first published, findings were misinterpreted and leading to misleading advice that alfalfa chaff should be avoided.

However, a closer look at the science revealed that those studies did not reflect real-world feeding practices:

- The 2016 Study^: Researchers fed warmblood foals a very large amount (3kg daily) of coarse alfalfa chaff or alfalfa pellets, alongside ad-lib hay and a supplementary feed of oats, soya bean meal, vitamins and minerals. 84% of foals had gastric ulcers before weaning and all were found to have gastric ulcers post weaning. This occurred across *both* diet groups highlighting the severe stress of weaning. The severity of ulcers at the exit of the stomach (the pylorus – part of the glandular region) was greater in foals fed alfalfa chaff but it was unclear whether this increase was the result of mechanical damage caused by the 'harsh' nature of the alfalfa, or by a breakdown in the stomach lining's defence system caused by the stress of weaning. For this reason, the same group of researchers completed a second study in adult horses.
- The 2017 Study~: This study looked at just six adult horses stabled 24/7 and fed alfalfa chaff or grass hay only. While there was a slight increase in minor glandular irritation, the results were not statistically significant, meaning the findings are not scientifically reliable enough to prove alfalfa was the cause.

## Super Science Says:

The latest research* confirmed that alfalfa has a high acid buffering capacity to support a healthy stomach. 10 horses were fed 5 different diets and researchers found chopped alfalfa extended chewing time, consequently increased saliva production, and had "greatest potential to support a healthy gastric environment". Regardless of whether alfalfa was chopped, refined or pelleted it had positive effects compared to feeding a cereal only based diet alongside hay.

Work published in collaboration with SPILLERS[$] was the first to show that appropriate diet management can maintain the positive effect of omeprazole treatment, even after treatment has stopped. The trial diet in this study included SPILLERS Ulca Fibre, a chopped fibre feed containing alfalfa.

Numerous research groups continue to investigate Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome and positive findings means the industry continues to recommend feeding horses chopped fibre, including alfalfa.

Find out about: Super Fibre = SPILLERS Ulca Fibre

# The Benefits of Alfalfa for Horses

Alfalfa is a legume, not a grass, which gives it a unique nutritional profile. Far from being a "bad" feed, it offers superb natural benefits for almost all horses:

- Natural Acid Buffering: Alfalfa is naturally rich in calcium and quality protein. These components help to buffer stomach acid and protect the delicate stomach lining.
- Low in Starch and Sugar: Despite the myth that alfalfa triggers laminitis, alfalfa is naturally very low in water-soluble carbohydrates (sugar and starch), making it a great option for horses and ponies who need more calories but are prone to laminitis.
- Premium Protein for Topline: It provides high-quality essential amino acids (the building blocks of protein), which are crucial for building muscle, maintaining topline, and supporting tissue repair.
- Slow-Release, Non-Heating Energy: Alfalfa provides energy through highly digestible fibre. This slow-release energy source is more suited to sharp or excitable horses than the quick-release energy found in cereal-based feeds

Product Spotlight: SPILLERS Alfalfa-Pro Fibre

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## Short-Chopped Fibre Belongs in the Bucket


Adding a high-quality short-chopped fibre (like an alfalfa-based chaff) to your horse’s bucket is one of the easiest ways to improve their diet:

1. Extends Eating Time: Adding chaff to compound feed forces your horse to chew more thoroughly. This significantly increases meal duration, helping reduce boredom and provides enrichment.
2. Generates Saliva: Horses only produce saliva when they chew. Saliva contains natural bicarbonate which acts as a natural stomach acid buffer. Increased chewing means more saliva and a happier digestive system.
3. Creates a Protective Fibre Mat: Feeding roughly a stubbs scoop of chopped fibre 30 minutes before exercise sits on top of the stomach contents. This creates a physical barrier reducing acid splashing onto the sensitive, ‘non-glandular’ upper lining of the stomach during work.

Recommended Reading: The Benefits of Fibre Blog

# Product Spotlight: Seriously Super Fibre

**SPILLERS Ulca Fibre** recently had a glow up! But while the bag may have changed, we

kept the same super high-fibre, high-oil, ultra-low starch recipe to support ultimate condition and digestive health. Here’s why horses and their owners love it:

| Feature | Nutritional Value & Benefit |
|---|---|
| Ultra-Low Starch & Sugar | Minimizes the risk of digestive upset making it suitable for horses more sensitive to cereals. Reduces the risk of excitability. |
| Highly Digestible Fibres | The tasty blend of fibres helps extend chewing times, increase saliva production, support a healthy gastric environment and promote great gut motility. Provides slow-release energy to keep your horse fuelled for longer. |
| High In Oil | Supplies safe, slow-release calories for condition, stamina, and a creates brilliant coat shine. |
| Quality Protein | Rich in essential amino acids to support topline, muscle function, training and recovery. |
| Suitable For | Performance horses, poor doers, laminitics requiring extra calories, those prone to gastric ulcers and those less suited to cereal based feeds. |

## Summary: Why Alfalfa Should Be A Feed Room Staple

In summary, alfalfa is a highly nutritious and useful feed ingredient that provides significant benefits to many horses and ponies. If you are looking for a way to increase chewing time, support your horse's digestive health and maintain their condition while avoiding cereals, incorporating alfalfa into their daily ration is often a great choice to help them look and feel their absolute best.

## References

^Vondran S., Venner M., Vervuert I. (2016) Effects of two alfalfa preparations with different particle sizes on the gastric mucosa in weanlings: alfalfa chaff vs. alfalfa pellets. BMC Veterinary Research 12:110; DOI 10.1186/ s12917-016-0733-5

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[$]Luthersson N, Bolger C, Fores P, Barfoot C, Nelson S, & Harris P (2017) Effect of changing diet on gastric ulceration in exercising horses and ponies following cessation of omeprazole treatment. Colic symposium Kentucky Equine Veterinary Education Volume 29, Issue S8. Page 19

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# Frequently Asked Questions

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1. **Is alfalfa safe for laminitis-prone horses or ponies?**

   Generally yes, provided it is fed correctly. Alfalfa is naturally very low in sugar and starch making it a great feed for horses and ponies. However, feeding larger amounts will increase their calorie intake so you must carefully monitor your horse's body condition. For good doers choose a low-calorie chopped fibre. For leaner laminitics needing to gain weight, alfalfa is an excellent calorie source.

2. **Do SPILLERS sell a chaff with alfalfa?**

   Yes. In fact, all our fibres contain some alfalfa - from a little to a lot. All SPILLERS chaffs contain a blend of fibres - horses naturally graze on a wide range of fibres - so a blend has been shown to support hindgut health in particular. Look at our full fibres range here.

3. **I still want to avoid alfalfa – does SPILLERS make alfalfa free fibres?**

   All SPILLERS mashes are high in fibre, low in sugar and starch and alfalfa free. We regularly recommend SPILLERS Speedy-Mash Fibre and SPILLERS Senior Super-Mash to horse owners looking for alternatives to our chaff range. Check them out HERE.

4. **Do I need to soak alfalfa pellets or cubes before feeding?**

   Highly compressed alfalfa pellets or cubes generally need to be soaked prior to feeding - always check the feeding instructions on the packaging. Soaking them in warm water for 15 to 30 minutes allows them to swell before they’re eaten, reducing the risk of digestive upset. Soft mashes can also help improve hydration and make them easier to eat for horses with dental issues and can make some horses feel fuller from the increased volume.

5. **What horses benefit most from alfalfa?**

   Alfalfa is best suited in larger amounts to horses with higher nutritional needs. This includes:

   - Broodmares (especially in late gestation and during lactation)
   - Growing youngstock and foals (to support bone and muscle development)
   - Poor doers and underweight horses needing extra calories from fibre sources
   - High-performance/athletic horses
   - Those prone to excitability or not suited to cereal based feeds

- Laminitis prone horses and ponies requiring calories which are low in sugar and starch

Many low-calorie chaffs contain a blend of fibres, including alfalfa, as it’s a useful ingredient for most horses and ponies.

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