The Ultimate Guide to Feeding Hay Replacers: Supporting Your Horse's Fibre Needs

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As grazing begins to dwindle though the autumn, many of us start planning our winter forage strategy so we can keep our horses happy and healthy. For most, this means feeding more hay or haylage. But for those with poor teeth, or clinical conditions such as laminitis, what happens when traditional forage choices are no longer an option?

As owners ourselves, we've been in similar situations ourselves and we know how stressful it can be when our horse start to struggle to eat enough forage to maintain a healthy weight. Of course, change can happen at any time of the year, and **hay replacers** really are life savers for some, ensuring your horse gets the essential fibre and calories they need to thrive.

Choosing the Right Hay Replacer

Finding the perfect match for your horse is all about understanding their individual physical needs and health status. It’s important to discuss details with your horses vet or dentist but to help make this choice easier, we've outlined some essential factors to consider when choosing a hay replacer:

Consideration	Feeding Advice & Tips
Short Chopped Fibres	Where possible, opt for short chopped fibres. The texture means they are a closer ‘match’ to long-stem forage so are brilliant for extending eating time and keeping their digestive system moving naturally.
Mashes or soaked feeds	If your horse or pony can no longer manage to chew short chopped fibre (often the case for those with diastemas), look for high fibre, low starch products that can be soaked into a highly palatable mash.
Full vs. Partial Replacers	Some products are only suitable as partial hay replacers. Sugar beet, pure alfalfa pellets or plain chaffs fall into this category and shouldn't be used as the sole forage replacer. Check product websites or packaging for information.
Managing Laminitics	Pure grass products can be surprisingly high in water-soluble carbohydrates (sugar) so should be avoided for those needing a low sugar diet.

Calories Count	Remember, not all forage replacers are equal. Some may be a similar value to hay, others might be closer to a conditioning feed. For poor doers choose higher calorie options, for good doers choose lower calorie replacers.
Vitamins & Minerals	Check if your chosen hay replacer contains vitamins and minerals. Those without will need additional feeds to ensure nutritional needs are met.

Top Tips for Safely Feeding Hay Replacers

Feeding hay replacers requires a slightly different approach to tossing a slice of hay into a stable.

Here is how you can make the transition safe, smooth, and stress-free for your horse:

- **Introduce Gradually**: As with any other dietary change, introduce hay replacers gradually to allow their hindgut time to adapt. Add no more than half a kilo every other day, a 5kg of hay replacer should take roughly 10 days to introduce to a horse - double this for a small pony.
- **Divide Into Meals**: If your horse has no access to grazing at all, divide their hay replacers into **a minimum of four meals**. Aim to feed the first and last meals as early and late as possible to avoid excessive long periods without forage. If your horse is out grazing all day, try to feed a small portion when they come in and more as a late feed if possible. Some horses will learn to self-regulate and realise they are no longer eating any hay, others won't.
- **Meal Sizes**: The golden rule with hard feed is to feed no more then 2kgs per meal for a horse. This helps them digest the meals more efficiently. Ideally this would be the case with hay replacers for those who wolf them down (ess of an issue for those who learn to graze on their replacer). Practically we know this is not always achievable, e.g. when needing to feed larger quantities over night so divide up meals as logically as possible.
- **Weigh Before Soaking**: Always weigh your feeds out dry - before you add any water. This guarantees you know exactly how much nutrition your horse is receiving.
- **Know Your Scoop Weights**: A standard Stubbs scoop of short chopped fibre weighs around 300g to 600g, whereas the same scoop of a pelleted option (like grass nuts or SPILLERS mashes) may weigh roughly 2kgs!
- **Manage Herd Dynamics**: For those living out 24/7, you may need to turn them out individually or separate them at feeding times to ensure they eat their full share without competition. Allow them the time to eat their whole meal.

Calculating the Perfect Feeding Rate

Ideally, we want to feed hay replacers ad-lib to mimic natural trickle feeding, but we know this isn't always practical – especially for our 'good doers' who put on weight easily. Weighing your horse's ration is essential to ensure they get the right amount. Generally:

1kg of dry hay replacer replaces 1kg of dry hay.

To maintain healthy gut function, total forage intake should never be restricted to less than 1.5% of their bodyweight daily on a **dry matter basis**. In practice, this means:

- For a **500kg horse** with no access to grazing, you will need to feed a minimum of **9kg of dry hay replacer** daily.
- For a **300kg pony** with no access to grazing, you will need to feed a minimum of **5.5kg of dry hay replacer** daily.
- For a **700kg horse** with no access to grazing, you will need to feed a minimum of **12.5kg of dry hay replacer** daily.

For those out still able to graze well for most of the day and in at night, logically we recommend feeding at least half this amount overnight if they're in a stable. This may seem a lot at first but remember, you are replacing some, or all, of their hay net, this is not a 'meal'. For poor doers you may need to feed significantly more than this.

If you are unsure, our nutrition team is always here to help!

We've spent decades researching and formulating feeds to support the health and happiness of every horse. Here's our range of SPILLERS products which can all be fed as full or partial hay replacers, each fully balanced with essential vitamins and minerals:

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Personalised Support for You and Your Horse

Feeding a horse without traditional hay can feel like a daunting task, but rest assured there are many horses in that situation these days. As owners ourselves, we're here to help - you don't have to navigate it alone.

For friendly, expert, and practical advice tailored to your horse's specific needs, get in touch with our **SPILLERS Care-Line** on **01908 226626**. Alternatively, you can complete our online consultation form(open in new tab) and one of our dedicated nutritionists will be in touch to help you make confident feeding choices.

Author

Written by: Vanessa Allen
Equine Nutrition Advisor, SPILLERS

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. **Can I feed sugar beet as a complete hay replacer?**

   No, sugar beet should only fed as a partial hay replacer.

2. **How do I know if my horse needs a hay replacer?**

   The most common reason is for dental issues (such as diastemas, overly worn or missing teeth in older horses) that prevent them from chewing long-stemmed hay properly, or more severe cases of laminitis where hay or haylage is too high in sugar.

3. **Why do I need to weigh the feed before soaking?**

   Water adds significant weight (and volume) but provides no calories or nutrients. Weighing the feed dry ensures you are providing an accurate amount of daily fibre and nutrition rather than underestimating based on the wet, soaked volume.

4. **Can laminitics eat grass hay replacers?**

   We generally advise avoiding grass products (like grass nuts or grass chaff) for horses prone to laminitis. This is because grass can contain high, unpredictable levels of water-soluble carbohydrates (sugar). As a partial hay replacer for those not at risk of laminitis they can be useful for adding variety and flavour.

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