

Sources of Fiber & Equine Health Issues: Long Stemmed Hay Vs. Processed Forages . . Which is Best for your Horse?

Long Stem Hay vs. Processed Forages: Which is best for your horse?

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Long stem hay is the best type of forage for your horse. In most feeding situations, it is better to feed the most natural form of fiber—baled hay with little to no processing. There are physiological and behavioral reasons why horses should have access to long stem hay on a continual basis, day and night:

- To prevent gastric ulcers and hind gut disturbances. The equine digestive tract is designed to handle a constant flow of fiber. As a grazing herbivore, horses eat and walk almost continuously. For stabled or paddocked horses unable to do this, providing long stem forage on a continual basis will promote gastrointestinal health and prevent damage to the lining of the digestive tract from too much exposure to gastric acid. Microbial populations in the hindgut can also be negatively impacted from lack of “ballast” or constant flow of digesta.
- To prevent vices. Horses that live in confinement become bored very easily, especially if they have nothing to eat for long periods. Oral vices often develop as a coping mechanism to combat hunger, boredom, physical hind gut discomfort and the stress of confinement. Providing long stem hay to chew can help prevent aberrant behaviors in stabled and paddocked horses.

With that said, there are other types of harvested forages, such as chopped hay, cubes and pellets, that can be fed when long stem hay is inappropriate or unavailable. It must be emphasized, however, that these alternative sources of forage should not be fed for extended periods as the sole source of fiber. Preferably, they should be used to augment a feeding program that includes long stem hay. The following types of horses and situations may benefit from processed, alternative forages:

- Aged horses with bad dentition who cannot properly chew long stem forage well enough to allow for proper digestion, metabolism and nutrient absorption. Using chopped forage or wetted pellets to make a mash in a feeding regime can help provide proper nutrition.
- Convalescing horses recovering from sickness or surgery that need very palatable, easily digested, excellent quality forage. Many bagged forage products are produced under well- controlled growing conditions and therefore tend to be very consistent in quality.
- When traveling to horse shows or trail rides that permit only guaranteed weed-free forages.

- When augmenting a balanced feeding program to increase forage intake. Horses in heavy training, pregnant and/or lactating mares, rescue cases and growing horses can benefit from the excellent quality and high palatability of bagged forages.
- When providing a healthy, non-sugary treat. Cubed forages are a wonderful way to provide treats to all types of horses, especially those prone to metabolic imbalances.

The health of the organisms in a horse's hindgut is dependent on having enough long fiber particles to promote optimal fermentation, which in turn provides vital nutrients to the horse. Chopped and cubed forage is long enough to technically qualify as long stem hay and are preferred over pellets. The particle size of pelleted forage is not adequate to maintain a healthy microbial population in the hindgut long term. However, neither chopped nor pelleted forages provide the chewing satisfaction that long stem hay offers, so please be sure to offer your horse long stem hay as a regular part of his or her diet.