

# *David Ramey, DVM*

## **DIET AND LAMINITIS**

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Unless you keep your horse on the range and don't see it very often, the easiest thing for you to control is its diet. Insofar as laminitis is concerned, the key to preventing laminitis is to limit its intake of easily digestible sources of carbohydrates. There are a couple of potential sources of those in your horse's diet.

### **Pasture**

As you know, even though fresh grass pasture is the most "natural" and least expensive way to feed horses and good quality pasture can be a complete nutritional diet for horses, it can also be a potential dietary land mine. Access to lush pasture has been attributed for almost 50% of all cases of laminitis in areas where horses could get to pasture.

Fortunately a few easy solutions to pasture problems exist. Obviously, you can just limit your horse's access to the pasture in the first place. You can keep the horse off pasture until the grass is more mature, or simply limit grazing time to a couple of hours each day. Since, on sunny days, the levels of the fructan carbohydrates peak around the middle of the day, you may want those hours to be in the afternoon. You can also put a grazing muzzle on the horse, although you can easily sympathize with a horse that's stuck out in a lush pasture, unable to eat the grass.

The other solution that works with many horses is simply to offer moderately good quality grass hay to your horses in pasture. By putting hay out in the pasture you're not trying to give the horse more feed to eat - you're trying to give it more fiber. It's been shown that horses will try to fill their requirement for dietary fiber. If the pasture is meeting their fiber and energy needs they will ignore the hay. However, if the grass is lush and full of water and fructans, you'll find that the horses will consume the hay, even though there's lots of green stuff for them to eat in the field.

### **Grains**

The second thing that you can easily do is limit your horse's access to whole or processed grains. Grains come in many forms, whether that form is rolled, crimped or as any number of processed or extruded feeds whose main ingredients are grains. (Each bag of

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feed has a label attached to it - you could read it.) Grains are an easily available source of calories, and some horses, particularly those that are exercising heavily or growing quickly, may need extra calories. Still, people tend to feed their horse grains for a variety of other reasons, including admirable ones, such as trying to make the horse happy. But the fact is that most horses don't need grain and are better off without them. Like lush pasture, grains are high in easily digestible carbohydrates and very low in fiber. This is the perfect dietary prescription for developing laminitis. The more you push grain into your horse, the more likely the horse is to develop a problem. And it's not just laminitis that's a problem; high-grain diets have been associated with all sorts of other problems, such as colic, exercise-related muscle problems ("tying up"), obesity and even behavioral problems.

It usually takes several pounds of grains at one time to cause laminitis in an adult horse, but it may require much less in small ponies. If your horse does need extra calories, consider other sources, such as increasing the amount of forage in the diet or adding fat (in such forms as vegetable oil or rice bran). It is certainly possible to safely give grain to a horse - simply as a calorie supplement - but if you're going to do it, you just shouldn't feed more than about 5 pounds of grain per feeding. You might also want to keep in mind that your horse may not necessarily think that restricting its grain is a great idea; make sure that you keep the area in which you keep your grain secure with latches on doors and secure tops on storage bins. These cautions will help to prevent laminitis, as well as to prevent other dietary problems, such as colic.