

Does Nutrition Influence Equine Behavior?

“Why did you buy this crazy horse, and how can you fix him?” Your gelding is “raring to go” all the time, dancing and bucking to the point where you’re almost afraid to get him out of the stall and ride him. Should you change his feed?

Your new filly is pretty bombproof at home, but acts spooky and silly when you take her to a show or trail ride. Should you change her feed?

Your friend’s barrel-racing mare constantly chews on fences and trees, but is unimpressed with her grain and sometimes won’t eat more than a few bites. Is there something wrong with her feed?

Your daughter’s event pony pins his ears and tries to bite every time you tack him up. Often he seems mildly uncomfortable and you wonder if he’s about to colic. Should you feed him more? Less? A different grain mix? Maybe a digestive supplement?

Multiple causes. Because each horse is a unique individual with a distinct personality, and also because many behaviors can have multiple causes, it’s a good idea to check with a veterinarian to be sure these “problem horses” are pain-free and in good health. In cases where a thorough veterinary exam does not turn up a medical explanation for the horse’s actions, changes in feed management may be important in modifying the way a horse behaves. *Advice from a professional horse trainer or riding coach is also an option, especially if the horse presents a danger, rather than just an aggravation, to its owner or handler.*

Feeding overly energetic horses. Remember the old saying, “He’s feeling his oats”? Too much feed and not enough exercise is a combination that makes many horses hard to handle. If a stall-kept horse tends to be too energetic to ride safely, he might be getting more calories than he needs, and reducing or cutting out his concentrate ration may help him to settle down. You still need to provide vitamin and mineral fortification, and the addition of a low-calorie balancer pellet can meet this goal.

A study conducted by Dr. Nell Davidson et al. entitled “The effects of diet and exercise on the behaviour of stabled horses” compared the behavior of two groups of stall-kept horses on different diets (forage or forage/grain) and two exercise plans (light or strenuous). When they received grain and light exercise, horses showed the highest levels of restless behavior when alone in their stalls and also uncooperative behavior when being handled. Horses eating only forage and performing strenuous exercise were less restless and more cooperative. The researchers concluded that both diet and exercise can produce effects on equine behavior.

If a high level of energy is needed for work, one approach to modifying the energetic horse’s behavior is to try switching to a feed that supplies more calories from fat and fewer from carbohydrates (grain). Owners report anecdotally that their horses “suddenly grew a brain” when they were fed a ration higher in fat and lower in carbs. Another management step to consider is letting the horse expend some energy by exercising in a pasture or dry lot, preferably with an equine companion or two, for as many hours as possible each day.

Feeding young, nervous horses. Why do young horses tend to behave quietly at home, but get worried and want to sit in your lap when you take them to shows or events? Actually, this is not a mystery: the home setting is familiar and therefore nonthreatening, but who knows what monsters may lurk in the woods at a trail ride? Usually these youngsters slowly gain more confidence as they continue to encounter new experiences. Taking along a quiet older horse often helps, and a dietary change may be beneficial also. A study led by Dr. Jan Bowman, an animal nutritionist at Montana State University, suggested a dietary modification that might decrease nervous behavior in young horses. She worked with a dozen Quarter Horses that were just beginning their training. All horses were fed as much grass/alfalfa hay as they wanted, and half also ate five pounds of sweet feed each day. A trainer worked with each horse five days a week, scoring it on obedience and separation anxiety. The horses wore pedometers and heart rate monitors while being trained. Study results showed that the sweet-feed eaters were livelier, less obedient, more resistant to being saddled, more inclined to buck and run, more anxious when separated from the herd, more easily startled, and more inclined to vocalize than horses on the hay-only diet. This suggests that diets with high levels of sugar may be linked to nervous behavior, while diets with lower sugar levels can allow young horses to stay somewhat calmer when faced with new situations and experiences. All horses gained weight throughout the study period, and it is not recommended that horses be deprived of adequate nutrition for any reason.

Feeding the wood chewer, picky eater, horse with a bad attitude, and horse with mild colic signs. Why are all these horses lumped together into one category? Each of these problems can have multiple causes, and it may take an examination by a veterinarian to sort them out. However, when you see these behaviors together, it's quite possible that the horse has some sort of discomfort in its digestive tract, and feed management may be to blame. Performance horses typically eat large grain meals to fuel the demands of training and exercise. At the same time, grass or hay consumption may be limited. This feeding plan often sends undigested starch into the hindgut where it disrupts the normal fermentation pattern and causes a shift toward a more acidic condition. The horse ends up with irritation, inflammation, and discomfort that may be expressed as colic signs, unwillingness to work, backing off feed, and chewing of fences or barn surfaces (not the same as cribbing, a behavior in which the horse grips a surface with its teeth, tightens its neck muscles, and appears to swallow air). Feeding smaller, more frequent meals and adding hay to the diet may keep such a horse more comfortable. KERx (www.kerx.com) has developed a time-released hindgut buffer, EquiShure, that helps to moderate acidic hindgut conditions and prevents related discomfort. Behaviors related to digestive tract discomfort tend to disappear as the pain is relieved.

So it really could be the feed! In some cases, behavior problems may be caused by, or related to, feed management, and simple changes in the type or amount of feed can make a big difference in the way the horse feels and acts. Owners can ask an equine nutritionist or feed dealer to recommend the proper feed based on the horse's history, behavior, and management.

Other factors such as the horse's age, breed, stage of training, personality, and overall health as well as the rider's skill, patience, and experience level might be at least as significant as the feed regimen in determining equine behavior. As noted above, it is strongly suggested that owners consult with a veterinarian to eliminate pain as a cause of misbehavior. Having an experienced trainer work with the horse is a reliable method to determine whether a particular horse needs more training or, unfortunately, is simply not a good match for its rider's skills and expectations.