

Alfalfa Provides Excellent Nutritional Benefits for Horses

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Horses love the taste of alfalfa and nothing could be better for them. Alfalfa is usually fed as forage but is also offered as cubes and in chopped form. Few horse owners realize that alfalfa is also commonly included in pelleted concentrate rations and supplements. The addition of alfalfa to a feed provides excellent quality protein, digestible fiber, digestible energy and calcium. Alfalfa is highly recommended to be fed to gestating and lactating mares, growing horses and horse that are intensively exercised and competing. Geriatric horses also do very well when alfalfa is included in their daily ration.

Alfalfa has higher values for percentage of protein, digestible fiber and digestible energy (calories) than grass forages such as timothy. Having a product of such high nutrient density utilized in feed formulations for horses is quite beneficial and it ensures nutrient intake is easily obtained. In other words, often a higher quality feed can be fed in a smaller amount than a lesser quality feed. This can be beneficial to the horse, whose small stomach has a limited capacity for meal feeding. Feeding high quality concentrates and supplements is also economical as the total amount of feed required is reduced.

The importance of a high plane of nutrition becomes critical when feeding certain classes of horses as stated above. Gestating broodmares have increased requirements for all nutrients starting the 8th month of pregnancy. Feeding good quality forage including alfalfa hay in the form of pellets, cubes or with a ration that incorporates alfalfa meal is the most natural way to help meet these requirements. Once lactation begins, the mare's requirements can nearly double and again the best way to help supplement nutrients is through the use of this excellent quality forage.

Growth also requires nutrient intake levels beyond maintenance of normal metabolism. Using alfalfa products as forage for young horses is best because it is much more digestible compared to grass hays. Young horses do not have full ability to ferment fiber until they reach about one year of age. Feeding poor quality forage sources often results in "hay belly" and therefore feeding only highly digestible fiber such as alfalfa, is recommended for the young, growing horse.

Horses involved in intensive training and competition have much elevated nutrient requirements and providing high calorie, highly digestible alfalfa products is the safest way to help meet nutritional needs of this group of horses. Often horses in training will become very selective as to what they will consume and generally alfalfa is all they will eat for forage. The high calcium content of alfalfa is very beneficial to horses in training, as it helps to buffer stomach acid and thus reduce the risk of developing stomach ulcers. The low-pH conditions in the stomach can damage the gastric lining. A research study compared a high-protein, high-calcium diet of alfalfa and grain to a low protein, low-calcium bromegrass and grain diet for ulcer incidence. Horses fed the alfalfa and grain diet had a higher stomach pH, resulting in fewer and less severe gastric ulcers

compared to the horses receiving the bromegrass and grain diet.

Growing horses entering training have a higher calcium requirement than their pastured counterparts due to demineralization of bone as a result of confinement to a stall (and no ability to sprint which strengthens the bone). Feeding alfalfa as forage as well as a component of the concentrate is an excellent way to help meet the calcium requirement of these horses.

Geriatric horses can be a challenge to feed. Many become thin and underweight as they age. The energy density and highly digestible fiber in alfalfa make it a good choice for getting excellent quality nutrition into the aged horse. Because the ability to absorb nutrients is decreased in older horses, high quality nutrients must be fed. The protein, calcium and phosphorus in alfalfa are highly digestible and will help the older horse remain healthy and in good weight.

Alfalfa is a very versatile, highly nutritious and palatable feed for horses.