

Too Many Treats

How do I know if I'm feeding my horse too many treats?

By Nancy S. Loving, DVM

Q. I have a tendency to spoil my horse with treats (carrots, apples, cookies, peppermints, et cetera). My friends tease me about it and say it's not good for my horse's health. Do you have general advice about feeding treats? My horse is healthy and in good weight.

A. No matter what a horse is fed, moderation is the best advice. A horse that is indulged in treats consumes extra calories, sugars and/or carbohydrates, depending on the food offered. There are two big problems with feeding treats:

1. Treats can contribute to obesity, and
2. spoiling a horse with hand feeding can make for a pushy, disrespectful individual.

Horses evolved to eat dried grasses and forage, not grains, peppermints, apples, carrots, cookies, horse candies, sugar, trail mix or PowerBars. The best recipe for digestive health is based on a high-fiber diet. High fiber comes in the form of hay, pasture, hay cubes and some pelleted feeds. Horse treats are often high in carbohydrates and sugars. Besides these things not being in the main equine food groups that promote nutritional health, once you start feeding treats you will have let the genie out of the bottle.

I can recall a client who spoiled his horse with treats, and one day while I was at the farm, the horse decided he wanted to get at the treat in this fellow's pocket. The horse was insistent, but the owner wasn't paying much attention. The only problem was that the pocket with the treat in it was attached to a pair of running shorts, short ones at that. The horse grabbed the shorts near his owner's crotch and pulled, hard. Luckily he only ripped the guy's shorts and not his body parts, but he did bare the poor guy's lower anatomy. This makes a funny story, but it is a true story with worrisome ramifications. If the horse had taken a little deeper grab with his teeth, or if it had been a child or someone holding out a hand, there could have been serious physical consequences rather than simple embarrassment. I have also known of people getting kicked while trying to catch a horse in a herd that is jostling and competing for treats.

If you feed an extra treat to your horse, the best recommendation is to put it into a bucket rather than offering it from your hand. Don't carry treats on you whenever possible. And, limit the amount of treats to just one or two of whatever it is, or offer only a portion of an apple or carrot. There is no reason to feed a pound of carrots or grain, or a bag of horse cookies, at one sitting. Remember, other than Trigger, horses can't really count, so they don't measure exactly whether you give them a pound or an ounce of a tasty thing. They will always beg for more. It takes strong willpower to ignore those baleful eyes, but your horse will be better off if you remain determined.

--Nancy S. Loving, DVM

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