

Feeding a Horse with a Poor Appetite

By Dr John Kohnke BVSc RDA

Although most horses are always hungry and enjoy eating, occasionally a horse will go off its feed and be unable to consume an adequate amount to satisfy its needs for energy and other nutrients. In this case, the horse will lose vitality, fall away in condition and lack the ability to perform as required, despite being provided an adequate and balanced diet.

Did You Know That...

As a horse increases in fitness during training and its efficiency of energy metabolism improves, it may reduce the amount of feed it consumes by 10-15% as it requires less energy to perform when physically fit.

A variety of physical, digestive and psychological stress factors can affect a horse in training, resulting in a reduced interest in eating, loss of appetite and feed left after each meal.

Common Stress Factors Causing Poor Appetite

Stress Factor	Cause	Symptoms	Remedy
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Pain on chewing due to sharp edged teeth. * Repeated strenuous exercise. * Pain from injury, lameness, acute or chronic respiratory disease, elevated temperature. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Dropping of food, slow eating, whole grain and long straws in droppings. * Fatigue, muscle soreness, reduced interest in feed, picky eating. * Reduced interest in feed - picky eating, depression, other specific symptoms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Regular teeth care every 6 months in horses in work, every 12 months in other horses. * Avoid too fast, too early work in training, and adequately cool down after exercise. * Examination by veterinarian to determine cause and appropriate treatment.
Digestive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * High grain, low roughage diets and limited access to grazing. * Diarrhoea - gut pain. * High grain intake, 2-3 meals daily, stress of confinement and exercise, gastrointestinal ulceration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Low grade diarrhoea, sore feet syndrome due to hindgut acidosis. * Dehydration and gut discomfort due to diarrhoea. Reduced appetite. * Stomach and duodenal ulceration, depression, changed eating behaviour - hungry, rushes to eat, then eats slowly or intermittently. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Provide more roughage relative to grain or replace some grain with fat as energy. * Ensure adequate electrolyte replacement and water for hard working horses to drink. * Regular, spaced out meals - more roughage, minimal confinement, medication with anti-ulcer preparation or physical acid resistant coating.
Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * New, unfamiliar surroundings. * Confinement to stables/yards. * Dark, dimly lit stables at night. * Nervy, immature horses. * Lack of social contact with other horses - loneliness. * Track sourness - long term training. * Increased handling in stabled horses. * Travelling, racing competition in immature horses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Unsettled, disturbed eating patterns, fretting, boredom, vices. * Reduced interest in feeding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Provide company or visual contact with other horses. * Provide outside yards where possible. * Settle young horses by training or by example from older horses. * Provision of more green feed, B complex vitamin and mineral supplement. * Reduce disturbance and handling to a minimum for 2-3 hours after each feed. * Acclimatise to travelling and frequent competition.

Check List for Poor Appetite

- Check teeth
- Evaluate feed quality and palatability
- Observe for signs of gastric ulcers
- Dampen and flavour feeds if necessary

Management to Improve the Appetite

1. Check Teeth

Sharp edged teeth in all horses, and uneven, stepped molar teeth and diseased teeth and gums, especially in senior horses, can cause pain and limit chewing of food. Check teeth and rasp and correct as necessary to make chewing more comfortable - it may take 3-4 days for mouth lacerations or pain to resolve and allow the horse to chew and grind its food without discomfort.

2. Check for Gastric Ulcers

Horses with painful gastric (stomach) or reflux 'acid burn' after eating or exercising, will often pick at their feed, eat and then rest, eat and drink, taking all day to eat their day feed after exercise, but licking clean overnight, and lose their appetite for 2-8 hours after hard exercise.

Other symptoms include standing with their front limbs close together when eating, and discomfort when the chest area under the left (near) elbow is pressed with fingers extended, especially following exercise or 10-15 minutes after the start of feeding.

A rough, dull coat and weight loss is common in horses with chronic gastric ulcers. Up to 50% of horses that go off their feed in hard training experience gut pain when eating due to gastric (stomach) ulcers, with up to 90% of horses having gastric ulcers or 'reflux acid burn'. Ulcer medications, combined with natural supplements which coat and maintain normal acid resistance in the upper stomach lining, such as **Kohnke's Own Gastro-Coat**, are recommended.

Note: **Kohnke's Own Gastro-Coat** can be given by mixing 2-3 scoopsful with lukewarm water in a syringe and immediately depositing it (before it goes 'gluggy') over the tongue 5-10 minutes before exercise and prior to feeding for 2-3 days to help maintain a physical coating on the upper stomach lining (it is acid resistant and lasts for up to 8 hours) so that the horse is more comfortable when eating and regains its appetite.

3. Unpalatable Feeds

A horse will occasionally reduce its intake, or refuse to eat feed that it finds unpalatable, as a result of its established likes and dislikes. Sudden changes in feeds should be avoided, and new types or sources of feed introduced in a step-wise manner over 5-7 days in known fussy, suspicious or picky eaters. When oil is substituted for grain as energy, introduce the oil over a 10-14 day period.

Kohnke's Own Energy-Gold is flavoured with pure garlic oil to ensure palatability.

4. If powdered supplements are refused

Mix the dose in a small amount of water and deposit the slurry over the tongue by syringe. Alternatively, administer a paste or liquid supplement over the tongue just prior to feeding. Pelleted supplements, such as the **Kohnkes Own Supplet®** pellets, are less likely to be sifted out. The aroma of concentrate feed may be made more attractive to an individual horse by distributing five drops of vanilla, aniseed, strawberry flavouring, garlic juice or 20-30mL of **Kohnke's Own Energy-Gold** oil over the top of the feed and mixing it into the feed.

5. Dampening the Hay

Horses in hard work may maintain their appetite when the feed is dampened, or when provided with green feed or green pick each day. Poor quality feed, such as very stemmy hay, or hay contaminated with weeds or prickly plants, should be avoided. It should not be made more palatable by the addition of sweetening substances, such as molasses. Dampen brittle hay by spraying it with warm water and allowing it to absorb the moisture for 30 minutes before feeding helps to make it more attractive to a picky eater and reduce leaf loss and wastage.

6. Reduce the bulk if feed is consistently left over

If an individual or small framed horse has a good appetite, but consistently leaves a portion of concentrate feed, reduce the bulk of an oat based feed by substituting some or all of the oats with a higher energy density feed, such as corn or barley or 20% of its volume of oil. Conversely, if a horse licks the bin clean at every meal, increase the bulk of the ration by providing extra chaff or hay to appetite. However, limit the extra bulk to avoid developing a 'hay belly' appearance and extra body weight as a result of this higher roughage intake in a hard working, or competitive racing sport horse.

For any horse with a poor appetite due to a respiratory condition, place hay and feed (both dampened) on the stable floor in a safe feed bin, such as a recycled tyre feeder. This will facilitate drainage of the lower airways as the horse feeds with its head lower than chest height. Alternatively, turn the horse out onto green pasture for 2-3 hours or longer during the day to graze with its head down.

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