

Autumn Feeding

Although there is a lot written about feeding systems at different times of the years, or the benefits of various materials, nutrients and nutraceuticals, we should never lose sight of the fact that horses are herbivores and the biggest portion of their diet is grass. Although there is a myriad of activities, environments, sizes and breeds, the physiology of the gastrointestinal tract remains the same, and grazing behaviour is hardwired into the horse's psyche.

As said, the horse is a grazing animal. The ranging horse moves into an area and selects a patch to graze. There are occasional forays to other sections to try different plants (a top up of nutrients!), and a return to the original. In terms of nutrition, this supplies a sufficient diet for a nomadic herd, and satisfies the behavioural needs of foraging, searching and remaining.

The domestic horse, however, does not have this freedom. If grazed, it is likely to be on limited species, and it also undergoes levels of activity that grass may not be able to sustain. Except, perhaps for the resting horse on grazing, we probably need some form of supplementation.

Traditionally, a hard feed – increasing in energy and protein, as activity increases – would have been the solution to the problem but, over the past years, the introduction of super fibres has changed the way we think. Providing higher levels of slow release of energy is regarded as a good option and reduces the risk of providing too much starch to upgrade feeds. Super fibres are those that are more fully fermented than forage fibre; beet pulp, for example has an effective degradability 50% greater than grass and recent research indicates that Speedi-Beet further increases this value. As such the energy levels of their diet can be increased whilst still relying on the volatile fatty acids that are the mainstay of horse digestible energy.

Feeding high levels of fibre has other benefits. Physical presence in the gut helps maintain the correct environment and physiology; the efficiency of microbial fermentation is optimised, the acidity of the gut well-buffered, ensuring a well-functioning system. Disruption, due to high starch feeds can, in some cases exacerbate problems like laminitis, ulceration, colic etc. Speedi-Beet has the additional benefit - with its ability to soak up to ten times its own weight in water - of assisting hydration of both the gut and the horse.

British Horse Feeds encourages the philosophy of “forage, fibre, feed”. This fits with the behavioural drive of the horse. What nutrients that cannot be achieved through grazing can be supplemented by searching (Fibre) and further achieved if that is insufficient. In the majority of cases, feeding a super fibre like Speedi-Beet alongside forage will supply all the protein and energy needed. Speedi-Beet has an energy level comparable to cereal sources and can replace hard feed with no loss of performance. Obviously, for intense activity a hard feed may be necessary but, if fed with Speedi-Beet, less starch or fat energy is offered and gut physiology is less impacted. Research has shown that gut fill does not affect performance detrimentally, and fermentation of Speedi-Beet fibre in the hindgut produces sufficient propionic acid that can be converted to glucose to energise fast twitch muscle fibres (those that provide the power required for intense exercise).

In short, by supplementing forage with a super fibre like Speedi-Beet is all that may be needed for the active horse.