

Grass Hay, Alfalfa Hay?

There are a lot of choices about which hay to feed a horse, and the answer doesn't have to be very complicated. Many horse owners spend a lot of time and money to find the hay they feel is right for their horse, but the truth is, many of the less expensive, more available hays may work just fine. Alfalfa vs Grass:

There is a common misconception that only high quality grass hay will work as a horse's main source of roughage. According to leading university equine nutritionists and scientific literature, there is no reason to think alfalfa hay is harmful to horses when fed properly. Most alfalfa hay contains a larger concentration of both protein and energy than typical grass hay, therefore alfalfa hay is likely a better buy than grass hay when the two types are priced the same. Because alfalfa hay is more nutrient dense than typical grass hay, more care needs to be taken when feeding alfalfa. Alfalfa hay can cause horses to founder and develop laminitis due to the excess nutrients provided by the high quality hay if too much is fed. If switching from grass hay to alfalfa, generally less alfalfa is required to provide the same nutrients present in the grass hay. The best way to evaluate the amount of hay that should be fed is to monitor the horse's body condition.



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Oat Hay, Wheat Hay, and other hays:

Sorghum and sudan grass hays should not be fed to horses. But don't overlook oat hay or wheat hay as potential roughage sources for horses. These hays, or a medium to low quality grass or alfalfa hay, may be the best choice for a horse. Many horses that are more than 2 years old, not pregnant, nursing, or doing very strenuous work have a fairly low energy and protein requirement. The nutrient needs of these horses would likely be well met by low quality hay. Oat and wheat hays are typically lower quality than grass or alfalfa hay but still have plenty of fuel to keep a horse in good shape.

Feed to Body Condition:

The best way to judge how much to feed horses is their physical appearance. Watch a horse's body condition and change the feeding program accordingly. Persons having a hard time finding ribs through all the fat may need to reduce the amount or quality of the feed. Obesity can be just as harmful to a horse as being too thin. If the mid and forward ribs are visible while standing back from a horse, increase the quantity or quality of the feed.

In General:

To avoid digestive and respiratory problems, always visually inspect hay for mold, dust, or other foreign material. When changing feeds, it is important to adapt a horse to the change slowly to avoid digestive upset such as colic. The same is true for switching between different forms and qualities of hay. Remember, the more gradual the dietary change is implemented, the less chance for digestive upset.

The actual nutrient content of hay can vary widely. Feed sampling, laboratory analysis, and ration evaluation are the best steps to ensure a horse is receiving the nutrients required to remain healthy. Check with a local Cooperative Extension Service (CES) office for help in sampling and analyzing feed or to formulate a horse ration.