

Sweet Teeth

Finding the right treat for your horse.

By Mary Huerter

Ever notice how many treats are in your local tack store? Whatever happened to plain ol' carrots and apples? Nowadays, store shelves are filled with horse cookies, snacks, and wafers. What's in those treats? Will your horse even like them?

With the heightened awareness many of us have about our horses' wellbeing, it's time to consider the role treats play in their diets.

Mrs. Pastures' Cookies for Horses is a favorite among horses, thanks to its palatability.

"Owners need to be aware of the ingredients listed on the package," says Seminole Feed nutritionist, Larry Mack. "Any ingredient listed should be approved by the FDA, but anytime an owner has a specific question or concern about a product, they should contact an equine nutritionist for advice."

If you, as a horse owner, decide to incorporate commercial treats into your horse's diet, be aware of ingredients so you can find the treat that best fits into your horse's program. With Mack's advice in mind, let's take a closer look at treats.

Traditional Treats

Some treats are formulated specifically as supplements and may aid in your horse's performance. "Old-fashioned" treats such as carrots and apples, however, are still an excellent treat choice, thanks to their high moisture content. During the 2000 Olympic Games, held in Sydney, Australia, nearly 20 tons of carrots were reportedly fed to equine competitors. Carrots, which contain 90 percent water, also serve as an excellent source of vitamin A.

Apples and bananas were other popular treat choices at the 2000 Olympics, which were fed for their nutritive value and to simply add variety to the horses' diets. In fact, the 240 horses competing at the last Olympics actually consumed more pounds of fruits and vegetables than of straight grains!

You can diversify your horse's diet, too, and not just with fruits and vegetables. An amazing variety of commercial treats are formulated just for your horse. Many treats contain ingredients such as carrots and apples but are easier to store and have a longer shelf life than the fresh product.

Treat Trials

With all the treats available on the horse market, the most important thing

to remember is to pick a treat that your horse will enjoy.

To experiment, I designed my own treat trials, incorporating nine different horses—Tory, Jo Daviess, Roanie, Cody, Princess, Rivers, Brandy, Stormy, and Scooter—ranging from 2 to 24-years-old. Our samples contained 13 different horse treats.

Mrs. Pastures Cookies for Horses topped my tasters' list for palatability. These cookies were easy to carry in my pocket because they didn't crumble and fall apart, yet they were also incredibly easy for my senior equine, Tory (who no longer has many teeth) to chew.

One of Tory's other favorites, also Roanie's top choice, was Miracle Corp's Nicker Snax. The size of a peppermint, these treats were easy to carry around in my pocket, easy for 20-year-old Tory and 24-year-old Brandy to chew, and great for training. Right Balance Horse Treats are more than just treats. They supply horses with Zinpro and other nutritionally beneficial ingredients, improving hoof health.

Giddyap Girls Premium Horse Treats, chosen by Brandy and my 5-year-old Arabian mare, Princess, come in a three-leaf clover shape that breaks into pieces to allow owners to vary its size. Both my neighbor's Saddlebred, Rivers, and my retired intermediate event horse, Jo Daviess, loved Hamilton Horse Cookie Company's heart-shaped Tally Oats treat, while 4-year-old Quarter Horse Cody preferred Ginger Ridge's Meadow Mints. Both 5-year-old Scooter and 2-year old Stormy eagerly gobbled up Ginger Ridge's two other oven-baked snacks, Harvest Hearts and Supper Stars.

Although these treats contain natural ingredients, such as apples, carrots, oats, and cane molasses, some treats are specifically formulated for a nutritional purpose. Right Balance, a heart-shaped treat manufactured by Mustad, Inc. is a treat specifically "balanced" to promote healthy hoof growth.

"If you're going to give a treat," says Tom Pramuka of Right Balance, "give them something beneficial."

Besides containing natural ingredients such as alfalfa, wheat flour, rolled oats, and dried molasses, Right Balance contains a zinc methionine compound called Zinpro. This compound is more absorbable than zinc or methionine alone. Zinc repairs, maintains, and produces epidermal cells, so not only is it necessary for hoof growth, but also for a healthy skin and coat. It also aids in healing wounds, immunity, and enzyme function. Right Balance includes vitamin E, an antioxidant, which prevents cell damage, and biotin, which builds the collagen tissue that bonds cells together.

Right Balance treats are available as 1 ½ inch by 1 ½ inch heart-shaped, baked treats. The recommended daily allowance is determined by the weight of your horse. For example, a horse ranging from 900 lbs. to 1,300 lbs. should be allowed four to six treats a day. There is, however, no harm in exceeding this recommendation. Any excess vitamins will be excreted in your horse's urine.

Treats in Training

Besides serving as a method for owners to diversify and supplement their horses' diets, treats are widely used in training. Given as a reward for good behavior, treat can accelerate a horse's training, especially with ground work or when encouraging a horse to perform tricks, such as bowing. Treats are useful in training timid horses because the horse is typically interested in approaching a person who is offering a treat.

Treats are also handy when teaching horses to bend. Using a treat to direct your horse's head is more efficient than trying to pull his head around with a halter and lead rope alone. They can also assist you in asking your horse to lower his head for the halter.

Sandy Augustine of Stud Muffins uses her treats to reward her horses' cooperative behavior.

"After feeding them Stud Muffins for a while when you go to catch them, they'll come running to you!" she says.

Treat sources

Augustine also uses her Stud Muffins when working with overprotective mares and their foals and when teaching horses how to load in a trailer.

Whatever your reason for treating your horse, and whichever treat you choose, remember that most treats do not supply major nutrients needed in the horse's diet. When choosing a treat, be aware of your horse's specific needs and nutritional requirements, and ask yourself if he would benefit from a supplemental treat such as Right Balance.

All treats should include a guaranteed analysis on their package that lists crude protein, crude fat, crude fiber, moisture content, vitamins, and minerals. Keep in mind that the manufacturer's guaranteed analysis of the treat is based on a daily feeding allowance that is usually printed on the package. Treats, after all, are just "treats."

Mary Huerter recently graduated from Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa, with a degree in English. She currently freelances articles for magazines and trains horses. Mary is a true believer in using treats for positive reinforcement while training horses.

Safe Treating

The safest way to feed treats is by placing them in your horse's feed dish. When feeding treats by hand, place the treat in the palm of your open hand so your fingers stay out of the way. Hold the treat away from your body so your horse does not crowd you. Be careful when feeding treats to pushy horses.

Storage

Treats should be stored in a cool, dry place to prevent mold, and in a rodent proof container. The higher the moisture content of the treat, the shorter its shelf life. Carrots and apples, which contain up to 90-percent moisture, should be stored in a refrigerator.