Avoiding a Hay Belly

As equine nutrition experts, we have often heard “My horse has a hay belly, what should I do differently?” or “he’s really big in the belly but he doesn’t have good muscles.” Apart from a broodmare belly, post-colic surgery effects or a parasite situation, the answer sounds like a nutritional imbalance. The good news is, once you know what a nutritional imbalanced hay belly is and what causes it, you can make adjustments in your program and avoid it in the future.

Willow has had 4 foals, and as a result, tends to show characteristics of a hay belly.

How to Identify the Problem

Have you ever seen a young or growing horse with a big belly while the rest of their body looks small? Or a mature horse that has a midsection that hangs low, while ribs are visible and muscles along the back and hindquarter are hard to find? How about the “pregnant gelding” situation? All of these are describing a hay belly. On a regular basis, you should conduct a body condition score on your horse to check for muscle mass as well as appropriate fat deposition in key areas. It’s important to check all areas indicated, since a rib or belly check alone doesn’t provide all the information.

Causes of Hay Belly

When too many low-calorie foods are consumed, and the level and quality of protein are inadequate, the gut expands and muscle mass atrophies. Over time, a hay belly emerges as muscle mass over the top is lost and gut size may expand.

The biggest factor is overfeeding fibre high in Neutral Detergent Fibre (NDF) while under feeding adequate levels of quality protein. NDF is a measurement of cell wall content in plants such as grasses. As the plant matures, it builds up stronger cell walls so that it may hold itself upright. The stronger these walls, the less digestible these cells are for a horse. So when fed very mature hay, your horse is less able to digest that hay, as compared to hay with a lower NDF value (less mature). In addition to being higher in NDF, the grasses also tend to be lower in the quality proteins; important nutrients for developing and maintaining muscles.

How to Prevent Hay Belly

First, feed the best quality hay that you can find in the correct amount for your horse's body weight, age and activity level. The hay that is smooth and "leafy" tends to have levels of NDF that are better for the horse to digest. Hay that is pointy to the touch or looks like it's a green version of straw should be avoided as it simply offers little nutritional value for the horse.

How to get rid of a hay belly if my horse has one?

First, check the quality and quantity of hay your horse is eating. If the quality is adequate, then it's time to reevaluate the quantity fed. A horse should receive a minimum of 1.5% of its weight in hay or long stem fibre (at least 3/4 inch long) but will more realistically eat between 2 and 3% of its weight per day. For example, for a horse weighing 1,000 lb, this represents between 15 and 30 lb per day, ideally spread over at least 3 meals. On the other hand, if your horse isn't fat and/or needs feed, you shouldn't limit the amount of hay served.

The last piece of the puzzle is feed. Make sure that the concentrate you provide is offering adequate quality protein. Total protein alone can't support or develop ideal muscles. The right balance of amino acids is needed to build and maintain muscle quantity and quality. Look for feeds that guarantee levels of Lysine, Methionine and Threonine Pre-, pre-, pro- and post-biotics are also very effective in increasing fibre digestibility and reducing hay bellies, as well as pre- and post-manure run-off, diarrhea, gas, etc. We should also mention yeast, for which Horse Shield is the perfect supplement. Feeding a balanced diet and adding some exercise to help develop muscle mass and tighten up that tummy is a great way to reclaim that belly!

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