

What NOT to feed your horse



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FEED COMPANY

Introduction

Us horse people can be funny folk. Not least when it comes to making up crazy cocktails of home-mixed food, or giving our neddies a cheeky treat.

We had a chat in our office the other day about the strangest things we had fed our horses, or had heard of others feeding.

As you might guess, there was quite a mix and some really odd stories.

Someone's friend was partial to sharing the occasional bag of Haribo with her horse (although we're not sure if that was of the Tangfastic or Starmix variety). Someone else owned up to feeding watermelon which is harmless really - even the rind is ok in small quantities if the horse will eat it. Another described how when a friend was cleaning out the stable, their horse wandered off and started tucking into a bowl of cat food. Urrrh!

Sometimes unusual treats are just a bit of harmless fun if they are given in small quantities. And other items shouldn't be considered unusual at all and are fine to feed regularly.

But there is a long list of foods and substances that you should definitely avoid giving to your horse or preventing them from having access to. Many of these are surprising, and the reactions in your horse can range from some mild discomfort or fizzy behaviour to, in rare instances, death.

We've pulled together some of the things to avoid and present them to you in this accessible guide. They are grouped into foods from your kitchen that you may be tempted to let them snack on, plants and foods your horse may find themselves when left to their own devices, and foods that contain substances banned by BETA NOPS, which are important to avoid if your horse is in competition.

I stress that if your horse eats something they shouldn't, or you suspect they have, and experiences or displays health issues, you must call in your vet as soon as possible.

I hope you find this guide helpful. If you ever have any questions about your horse's diet, please do not hesitate to call our nutritional helpdesk on 01458 333 333.

Lou Talintyre

Founder of The Pure Feed Company



What NOT to feed your horse... from the kitchen

Kitchens are a hive of activity. The place where you store, prepare and maybe eat food as a family. And with so much food lying around it's tempting to think about giving leftovers, peelings or even something fresh to your horse as a snack. Sometimes this is fine. But here are some of the items you should avoid, or be wary about feeding to your horse.

Potato peelings

After cooking a roast dinner, you may wonder what to do with that mound of potato peelings left behind. If you're thinking that they might be a nice treat for your horse, think again – because they can cause serious harm.

Raw potatoes, particularly green ones, contain solanine – a toxic substance that is the potato's natural defence against predators. When horses are fed raw potato peelings, the solanine within them can cause health problems. Signs of a horse having problems because of potato peelings include colic, moody behaviour, decreased heart rate, weakness, and convulsions.

Alongside solanine, the starch in them can cause the peelings to swell inside the horse's throat, making them a choking hazard. In most cases a horse can recover from the effects of potato peelings. You should call your vet if you know or suspect your horse has consumed potato.

Cabbage

In salads, as a side vegetable or in soup, there are many ways for humans to enjoy cabbage – but is it good for horses too? The answer is no – it is not recommended to feed your horse cabbage.

As a rather gassy vegetable, cabbage has been known to cause gas build-ups in horses' stomachs resulting in major discomfort including digestive problems, scouring, bloating and colic. Although some say you can feed a horse very small amounts of cabbage as an occasional treat, we recommend avoiding it altogether because the potential effects can be serious. The same goes for cauliflower, broccoli and Brussels sprouts.

Avocado

Avocado – great for humans, so great for horses too, right? Wrong. Avocados contain substances that are toxic to your horse and can cause them serious harm.

Within avocados is a toxin called persin that is derived from the fatty acids. If this is consumed by a horse, it can cause a range of health problems. These include congestive heart failure, colic, irregular heartbeat, respiratory problems, neurologic dysfunction and edema. Contact your vet as a matter of urgency if you suspect your horse has eaten any part of an avocado.

Rhubarb

Rhubarb crumble and custard can be a lovely winter warmer of a pudding, but rhubarb can be lethal if ingested in large quantities by horses (and we wouldn't recommend the custard either!).

The leaves of the rhubarb plant contain powerful toxins. The digestive and urinary systems of your horse can be damaged by these. Rhubarb can also cause severe kidney damage, sometimes leading to kidney failure and on rare occasions death. Symptoms of rhubarb poisoning can include trembling, staggering, weakness, increased thirst and urination, tremors and weight loss.

Garlic

(in excess of recommended feeding rates)

A seasoning loved by many of us, often we add a bit of garlic to our food to bring out the flavour. And whilst small quantities of garlic are considered safe for a horse, too much has negative effects.

The sulphur found within garlic is known to have blood cleaning properties which are useful when treating and preventing diseases in horses. Garlic also acts as an antiseptic, an anti-inflammatory, an antibiotic, and a fly repellent, alongside lowering blood pressure.

However, there is also a toxic element in garlic known as n-propyl disulphide. An excess of garlic is bad for horses as it can change an enzyme within the horse's red blood cells, resulting in anaemia. Onions, shallots, leeks and chives are all members of the same family and therefore also contain n-propyl.

Unpitted stone fruits

There is no doubt that fruit is good for humans. And the great news is, is that many fruits with large stones can be healthy for horses too – providing they are washed, cut up into small pieces and the stones and pips have been removed.

Fruits can add some much-needed variety to a horse's diet whilst acting as a treat. If you do feed such fruit to your horse, it must be consumed in small servings and have the stones removed. If the stones have not been removed, they can act as a choking hazard and pose a serious health risk to your horse.

We hope it is obvious, and haven't included it in our list, but to be safe: NO MEAT AND NO DAIRY!

What NOT to feed your horse... that they may stumble across or be exposed to accidentally

Turning out your horse to graze is an important part of their lifestyle management. It helps to emulate their environment in the wild and allows them to act out their natural grazing behaviour. Access to forage will fulfil some of their nutritional requirements and also their physiological need to chew which brings a host of other benefits.

But what could your horse stumble upon whilst grazing or around your yard that it should not be eating?

Grass cuttings

Despite the fact that horses naturally graze on grass, allowing them access to freshly mown grass cuttings is a terrible idea!

In this form, grass is highly dangerous and even fatal to horses. As soon as grass is cut it starts fermenting, giving off gas. Cut finely and in large quantities, your horse has an easy and tasty feast.

But without the need to chew, already fermenting grass arrives in the stomach undiluted by saliva. So much gas can be given off that it can bloat the stomach to the point of rupture which can be fatal (it is impossible for horses to burp or vomit to release the pressure). Normally fermentation would happen in the hind gut where lower levels of gas can be dealt with safely. In addition, other poisonous plants may end up chopped and mixed into the cuttings presenting an additional danger.

Yew leaves, twigs and bark

Yew trees are not uncommon in the British landscape. But this humble flora poses a severe risk your horse.

Even small quantities of Yew can be lethal to your horse. Taxine A and B, the plant's toxic alkaloids, work very quickly and there is no treatment available once your horse has ingested them. The toxicity takes effect so fast, causing cardiac arrest, that unfortunate horses have been found dead with yew leaves still in their mouths. You should always avoid allowing a horse to graze in a paddock in which yew trees are present or yew clippings could be deposited.



Ragwort

Ragwort is the number one culprit for poisoning horses in the UK. It has a bitter taste so horses may naturally avoid it, but it is still a danger and can spread easily.

Ragwort attacks your horse's liver, and can cause weight loss, blindness and collapse. It is wise to regularly check grazing areas for signs of ragwort – it is a distinctive star-shaped yellow flower. If you discover its presence you should dig it up at the roots and burn it before it goes to seed or even better, before it flowers. This is because the dead flower heads and seeds that fall to the ground will cause harm if your horse eats them. Wear gloves when handling ragwort.

Sycamore

Sycamore trees are a regular sight throughout the British countryside. And whilst they might seem innocuous, their leaves can be harmful if consumed by a horse.

The seeds found in sycamore leaves contains the toxin hypoglycin A, which is known to cause atypical myopathy in horses. The onset of this disease can be rapid, and it is often known to be fatal. Symptoms of atypical myopathy include muscular weakening and stiffness, dark urine, fatigue, shivering, sweating and trembling. If a horse is diagnosed early enough it can be supported, so call a vet as soon as you suspect they have eaten sycamore.

Mouldy hay

If you have several bales of unused hay, you might not think twice about giving it to your horse. But what if the hay has mould on it? The answer is "don't give it to your horse", because it can be rather harmful.

Mouldy hay can contain fungal and actinomycete spores - these cause respiratory diseases whilst also leading to digestive problems such as colic or heaves. Mouldy hay can also produce toxic metabolites known as mycotoxins. These contribute to reproductive, immunological, respiratory and gastrointestinal disorders in horses. If your horse ingests mouldy hay, speak to a vet.

Dusty Hay

If you find some of your hay bales have dust in them, does it matter if your horse has access to them? Well, dusty hay can cause a range of respiratory issues – particularly if your horse is already prone to coughing.

Like mouldy hay, dusty hay can start respiratory illnesses, so it is not advisable to give it to your horse or leave around where they could find it. Whilst some horse owners contest that a batch of dusty hay is safe if it is soaked in a bucket of water and hung up to dry, as a precaution, we would advise against feeding it to your horse.

What NOT to feed your horse... foods that will breach NOPS regulations

If your horse does any level of competition from eventing to show jumping, racing to polo, the BETA NOPS scheme will be relevant to you. NOPS stands for naturally occurring prohibited substances and is defined as “any substance that can exert an effect on a horse” that is naturally present in ingredients or can get into feeds via cross-contamination.

Some of the main offenders are caffeine, theobromine, theophylline, morphine, hyoscine, hordenine and atropine. Let's explore some foods containing these sources that you may be tempted to let your horse have a munch (or slurp) on, or expose to accidentally.

Chocolate

Whether you, or a well-intentioned friend on your yard, are tempted to give your horse a chocolaty snack, we urge caution.

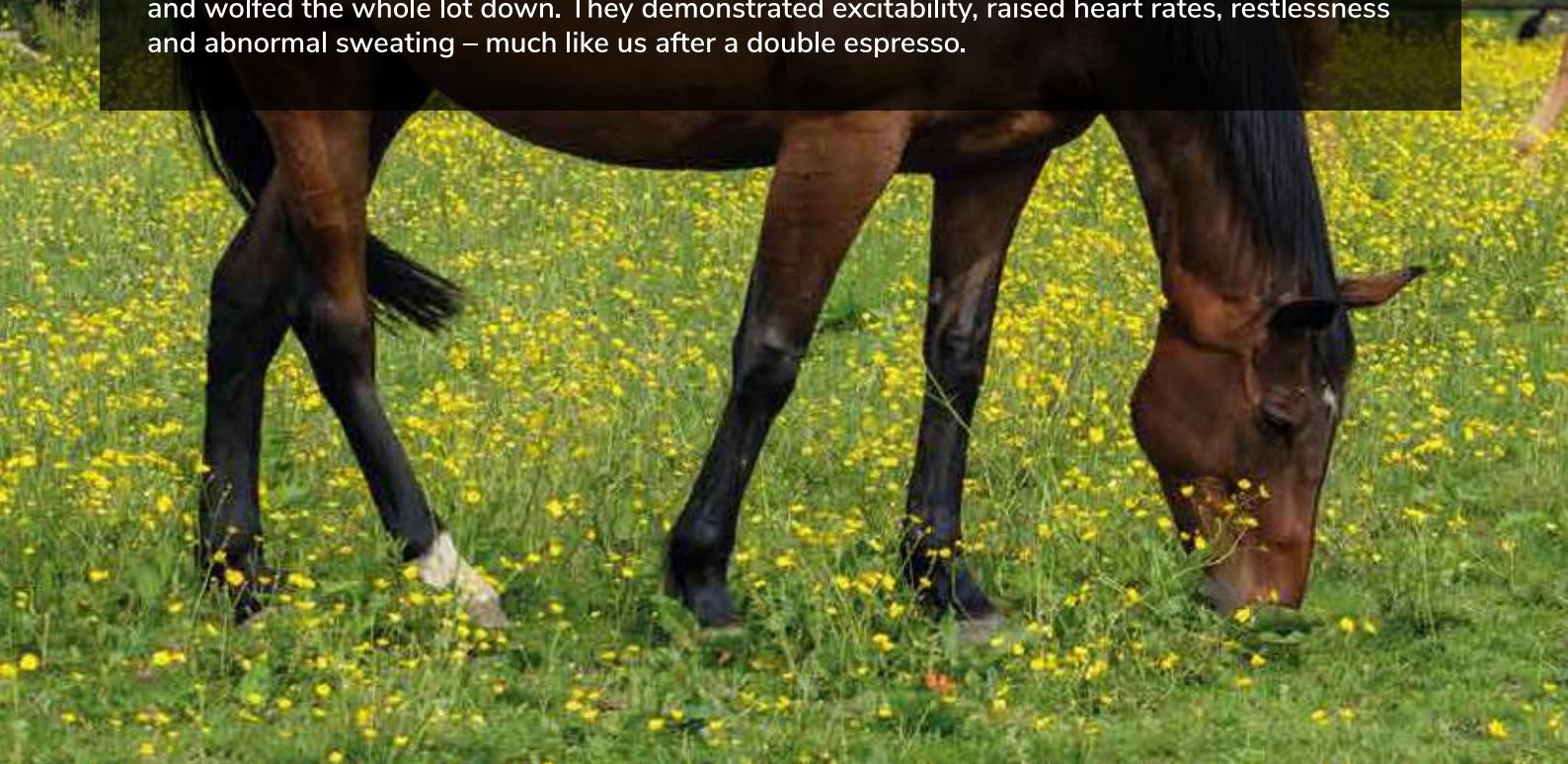
Most people know that dogs cannot eat chocolate, but it is also true that it is not good for horses either. This is because it contains the chemical theobromine which horses are not able to metabolise. This can make it toxic if eaten in sufficient quantities. Throw in the fact that theobromine is banned under NOPS and chocolate is definitely one to avoid.

Tea and coffee

We have heard of some people allowing their horse to take a slurp of tea or coffee from their mug, and reporting that their horses love it. But there is a good reason to avoid this that may slip your mind whilst having a bit of fun in the yard.

You don't need us to tell you that tea and coffee contain caffeine. So, this is quite a straight forward case of breaching NOPS regulations. Even if it is just an apparently harmless splash to a feed mix or stealing a sip from your favourite tea or coffee mug.

In other unusual cases horses have been exposed to far higher caffeine levels which have significantly impacted behaviour. In some countries, coffee bean husks have been used as bedding. Curious horses, starting with a quick nibble, have taken quite a fancy to their bedding and wolfed the whole lot down. They demonstrated excitability, raised heart rates, restlessness and abnormal sweating – much like us after a double espresso.



Prohibited plants in the countryside

Whilst many beautiful plants adorn our countryside some of these can leave you on the wrong side of a drugs test if consumed by your horse.

Plants such as the poppy, nightshade, germinating barley are all on the main NOPS list.

There is also a herbal NOPS list divided into high and low priority substances some of which are found in the UK. These include foxglove, valerian, and meadowsweet.

As well as failing BETA NOPS standards many of these plants can have a toxic effect on your horse so there is extra incentive to be wary.

Horse feed without a BETA NOPS logo

If your horse competes at any level, you will want to choose a horse feed that complies with BETA NOPS regulations. It is impossible to guarantee that any feed does not contain a prohibited substance. But all the companies that operate under the NOPS scheme give you the best chance of avoiding issues.

All you need to do is look out for the BETA NOPS logo on your feed bag.





Need more advice on horse diets?

That's the end of our run-down of foodstuffs to avoid feeding your horse. It's not exhaustive but we hope you've found it helpful. Remember, if you have concerns that your horse has eaten something harmful, speak to a vet as soon as possible.

For additional in depth dietary advice, check out our website or call our equine nutrition team on 01458 333 333. We can offer you a free equine diet plan if you get in touch.

How to contact The Pure Feed Company

Helpline: 01458 333 333 (9:00 – 17.00 Monday to Friday)

General and nutritional enquiries: info@purefeed.com

