

Should I feed from the floor?

OUR EXPERT PANEL



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Q I usually feed my horse her hay from a net, but I've heard that this can cause neck and back problems. Is this true? If so, what is the best way of feeding my horse's forage?

Lucy Stevenson, by email

JUSTINE SAYS Horses are grazing animals that have evolved over millions of years to eat at ground level. In the wild they would eat low value, high fibre food for up to 18 hours a day, browsing on bushes, trees and shrubs at different heights. However, their heads would be down and grazing at ground level for the majority of the day.

If you watch a horse grazing, they will move around constantly and rarely stand still unless dozing or sleeping. It is usual for a horse to move his feet every five to 10 seconds.

When we give a horse a haynet, or a hay rack, up high to eat from for a long period of time, this is very unnatural for them – both physically and mentally.

The constant, repetitive pulling action by the head and neck and the long periods of time spent standing in one position can cause physical problems.

We often see horses becoming frustrated, as there is a mental conflict with their natural instinct to move, while eating at ground level.

Just as many horses knock their feed out of their bowl and eat from the ground, some paw at their haynet in an attempt to pull it down, and this puts them at risk of getting their feet caught.

Ideally, we should feed horses from the floor or from a ground-level manger wherever possible, because this allows them to eat with their heads down, and use their neck and back correctly. This will mimic their natural grazing behaviour and also reduce the risk of frustration.

There are some key benefits to feeding at ground level – horses are more relaxed and they chew each mouthful more thoroughly, therefore absorbing a higher level of nutrients from their food.

There is also reduced exposure to respiratory irritants, such as dust particles, and it helps improve posture and topline.

If your horse has to be stabled, keep an area on the floor clear of bedding, so you can place his forage ration there.

If he is prone to dragging his food into the bed, you could invest in a manger or a hay bag suitable for ground level use. Large rubber tyres make great low-level mangers.

You can still hang small haynets and enrichment items around the stable at various heights, but the bulk of his forage should be at ground level.

If your horse insists on trashing his forage ration, you could invest in a Haybar or similar.

Feed your horse a variety of forages to prevent boredom with just one food source.

Suitable shrubs can also be cut and placed amongst the forage ration. Horses love cow parsley, cleavers, mint and dandelions



Feeding from the ground allows the horse to adopt a more natural head and neck position

– find out what your horse enjoys and cut something different for him every day.

Part of a horse's diet would naturally be bark and branches, so put horse-safe logs and suitable branches around the stable and field for your horse to browse on. (Obviously check they are not poisonous.)

JEN SAYS As an equine physiotherapist, I regularly advise owners to feed forage on the floor or in low feeders where possible.

There are many health benefits to low-level feeding, which mimics natural feeding habits of wild horses, who graze with their head and neck stretched down to the floor.

Horses and ponies that are stabled for long durations will normally spend a lot of time at their haynet, pulling and yanking at it in different directions.

While this type of movement may occur when horses are in the wild, such as when eating shrubs or browsing on trees, it is different to the repetitive use of a haynet. The latter can lead to repetitive strain injuries, poll tightness and reduced movement in the neck.

Eating from a haynet also tends to lead to a higher head position than a horse's natural feed intake position, and therefore uses different neck and back muscles. This can lead to increased muscle size and tightness in the underside of the neck. These are the

opposite muscles that, as riders, we normally try to develop with our horses.

Research has shown that elevated head and neck positions induce extension in the back (hollowing).

Carrot stretches, pole work and ridden exercises all aim to increase abdominal and topline muscles by working in the reverse direction to this hollowing.

So, all the hard work you do may be nullified by your horse standing eating out of his haynet for extended periods of time.

In addition to the musculoskeletal benefits of feeding low or from the floor, there are digestive and respiratory benefits.

However, there is an increased risk of parasite re-infestation with hay being dragged through bedding.

To work out what is best for your horse, ask yourself the following questions:-

- Do I need to limit or slow my horse's hay consumption rate for medical reasons? If so, a small-holed haynet may be needed.

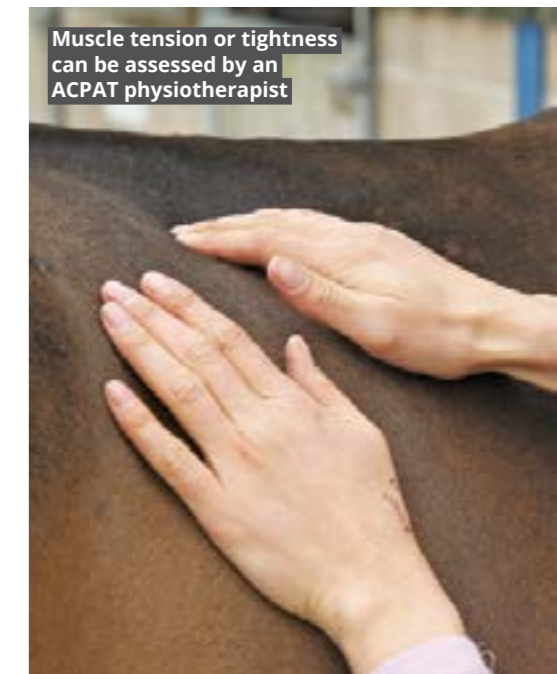
- Does my horse pull his haynet down, into the bedding? In this case, he may be happier being fed from the floor.

- What proportion of the horse's feed is in a haynet, compared to grazing? If he is mostly at grass and only spends a short time eating forage, using a haynet may not have such a negative impact on physical health.

- Does the horse show pain-related behaviours or difficulty with schooling? I recommend booking a session with an ACPAT (Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy) physiotherapist, who can assess muscle tension or tightness and spinal movement. This also gives you a chance to discuss the best feeding regime for your horse.



Tugging at a haynet can cause physical and mental issues



Muscle tension or tightness can be assessed by an ACPAT physiotherapist