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# Grazing muzzle dilemma

by Justine Harrison,  
Equine Behaviourist

*Grazing muzzles are often recommended by equine health professionals to reduce grass intake for horses who are either at risk or diagnosed with EMS or laminitis. They seldom come with an instruction manual, and before you use them, you should know that it will take training for your horse to adapt to what is a very restrictive piece of equipment. In this article, behaviourist Justine Harrison explains how...*

While in many cases they may be an immediate solution to reduce sugar intake, grazing muzzles do restrict the horse's natural behaviours, and in my opinion they should come with a warning label!

Grazing muzzles should be viewed as a short-term management strategy. Once your horse's weight is acceptable, you adapt your grazing system, and they are having adequate exercise, the muzzle should no longer be necessary.

Whilst not ideal, grazing muzzles do allow your horse the freedom of turnout in a group, to socialise again as part of the herd, rather than being 'locked up' in a stable or bare yard all day.

Remember your horse will be unable to groom himself or mutually groom his friends. You will need to allocate time every day for your horse to be turned out in a grass-free area with a friend.

A restricted paddock or grass-free yard can be turned into a more entertaining and healthy environment if your horse has access to low NSC hay and an enriched environment which can include different types of hay in separate slow feeding haynets, a variety of suitable forage material in branch feeders, toys, logs and above all equine company (for more articles on slow feeding, enrichment, and alternative forages go to <http://www.horsesandpeople.com.au/category/MB-Nutrition>)

## INTRODUCING YOUR HORSE TO A GRAZING MUZZLE

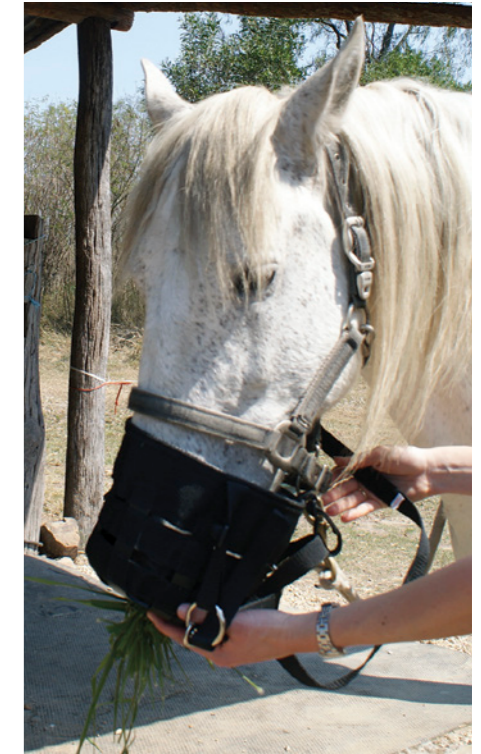
*Grazing muzzles need to be introduced gradually, and associated with good things happening: turnout, equine company and freedom.*

**1 Be patient.** Grazing muzzles are very restrictive both physically and behaviourally and your horse may not like wearing one. You need to ensure that the muzzle is associated with the good things in life: freedom, food, and the company of friends. If this is the case, most horses will accept the muzzle willingly.

**2 Check the size.** The muzzle should be the same size as your horse's headcollar and have a good breakaway safety system. Also check your field or turnout area, ensuring all fencing is safe and there is nothing your horse could catch the muzzle on.

**3 Introduce** it initially by holding the muzzle near your horse's head, rewarding him for staying calm with a treat or a really good wither scratch. You can use celery, lettuce, fibre nuts, alfalfa cubes or some sugar free mints as rewards.

**4 Reward.** Put some treats in the base of the muzzle to encourage him to eat out of it. Once he is relaxed about eating from the muzzle, gradually slip the headpiece over your horse's ears. Only leave the muzzle on for a few seconds initially before removing it and rewarding your horse.



*Feed your horse treats through the base, you need to make sure he is relaxed about eating through it. Gradually increase the time wearing the muzzle and watch how he behaves.*

**5 Adjust the fit.** You should allow a space of about an inch between your horse's mouth and the base of the muzzle. It should not be tight or restrictive and allow plenty of room for your horse to chew comfortably, however it does need to fit snugly enough that your horse cannot get the headpiece over his ears.

**6 Gradually,** over several sessions, increase the length of time wearing the muzzle up to a few minutes. Feed your horse treats through the base, you need to make sure he is relaxed about eating through the small hole.

**7 Grazing.** Once your horse is readily accepting the muzzle, put it on and start taking him for short turnout sessions. Watch how he behaves. He may struggle to work out a technique, and you may need to put some fibre nuts on the ground to encourage him to graze through it.

**8 Increase turnout time gradually** and monitor the behaviour within the herd to make sure there are no sudden changes to group dynamics. Initially your horse may try to rub the muzzle off, so check on him regularly for the first week or so.

**9 Check regularly** that the muzzle does not rub your horse's face. You may want to try a different model, or add a soft padded sleeve to the straps to prevent sensitive areas being chafed.

**10 Reward** your horse immediately the muzzle goes on with a treat, and take him straight out to graze so he continues to associate the muzzle with good things. Likewise reward him as soon as he is brought off the pasture and the muzzle is taken off.



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