

# Alfalfa is for COWS!

## A Horse of Course

by Don Blazer

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**I thought I was the only one blamed for everything.**

**Not so.**

**I'm off the hook.**

**Blame alfalfa for everything, from tying up to navicular, from a calcium/phosphorus imbalance to enteroliths to resistance to training.**

And you thought alfalfa was the perfect feed for your horse. Your horse thought so too. Well, think again!

Alfalfa might just be among the worst things you can feed your horse, even though your horse looks good, has a shiny coat, and loves every stem of the green, sweet hay.

Alfalfa is a cattle feed intended to fatten animals for slaughter. When feeding alfalfa to cattle there is no concern with keeping the animal sound and able to work for 20 years or more.

Alfalfa, generally, is 18 to 20 per cent protein and often higher. It's the high protein which is the culprit.

A horse's digestive system has to work extra hard to convert protein to usable energy creating a high body temperature. That's the first problem.

Not too serious, you say. Of course not. But it is only the beginning.

Alfalfa is also very high in calcium and low in phosphorus. Young horses need a calcium/phosphorous ratio of about 1.5 to 1. Older horses do nicely on a 2 to 1 ratio, and can stand up to 5 to 1 calcium to phosphorus. But lots of alfalfa for breakfast and dinner can push those ratios to disastrous proportions if there isn't another feed in the diet to correct the imbalance.

Grain, which is high in phosphorus, and low in calcium, is nature's way of balancing the ratio. But lots of horse owners don't want their horses eating a lot of grain--gives them too much energy--and so there is no diet balancing.

Excessive calcium creates the first big series of problems. It all starts with excessive calcium interfering with the function of the parathyroid gland. When the parathyroid gland thinks there is too much calcium available, it shuts down, which in turn disturbs other functions and leads to "thumps", muscle cramps, and tying up, all of which can have serious consequences.

Excessive calcium can also result in hypothyroid horses, which are plump and shiny, but usually cranky, belligerent, resistant to bending and flexing, very lazy and emotionally unstable.

Young horses being conditioned for performance or halter are often plagued by unsoundnesses, as well as training problems, simply because they are physically and emotionally troubled by thyroid or metabolic imbalances nutritionally-induced by alfalfa.

Alfalfa can cause numerous training problems seemingly without solutions. Don't blame your horse or your training techniques; check your feeding program.

A calcium/phosphorus imbalance will cause knuckling over and contracted tendons in young horses. Good, rich alfalfa will make young horses grow quickly and often end in epiphysitis, a joint condition which can have long lasting ill effects.

High amounts of protein (thanks to alfalfa) when digested, result in an acid condition within the horse. The horse needs to be slightly alkaline.

To buffer the acids in the blood, the horse's body pulls the alkaline minerals from tissue and bone so the heart can continue to function properly. The heart, according to the horse's body, has a higher priority than ligaments and bones. The result: osselets, spavins and navicular condition.

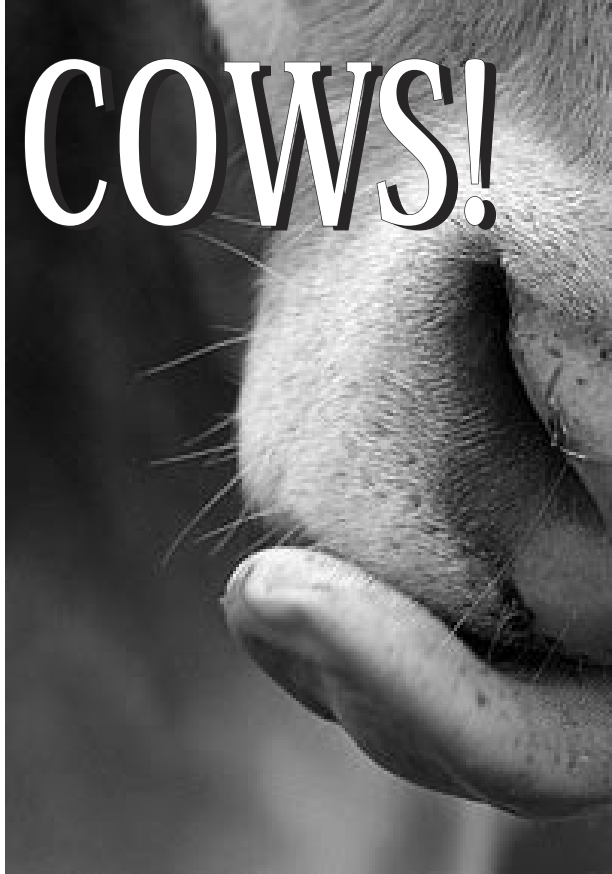
Kidney problems are common in horses which eat a lot of alfalfa. In an effort to get rid of the excess protein in the diet, there is often frequent urination and possible kidney damage. Kidney stones many times are the result of high calcium and high protein in the horse's diet; thanks to alfalfa.

Alfalfa is the only direct link to stones (enteroliths) found in horses. It is very common for horses in California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah--states which feed a lot of alfalfa--to have stones. Horses which do not eat alfalfa virtually never have stones.

Finally, studies have shown that horses eating mostly alfalfa have a higher incidence of disease than horses on grass hay. In study groups, alfalfa-fed horses had more severe disease symptoms than horses on grass.

When taken off the alfalfa, reducing the high amounts of protein, the diseases ended without treatment.

If you are feeding alfalfa, in any form, reevaluate your feeding program and



consider adding a different roughage. Your horse likes his alfalfa, but he won't like a calcium/phosphorus imbalance, being hypothyroid, cramping or tying up, having kidney stones or kidney disease, arthritis, osselets, spavins or navicular.

He may be unhappy about being taken off alfalfa, but he sure might be a happier, healthier horse who loves to train, compete and enjoy extra years of pain-free exercise.

You may not choose to change. That's up to you. But if you don't do anything, don't blame me.

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Don Blazer is an author, a teacher, a trainer and a trader. For more than 40 years he's helped thousands of horses and horse owners enjoy the best of relationships based on knowledge, understanding and actions which are mutually beneficial.

The author of eight How-To books on training performance horses and horse health care, he also writes the syndicated column "A Horse, Of Course," which is a must-read for thousands of fans across the nation.

As a teacher, he's traveled from Alaska to Australia demonstrating training techniques, and he's taught a variety of horsemanship courses for seven colleges and universities.

Show horses or race horses, he's trained world class winners at both ends of the spectrum. His show horses have competed at world championship events and his race horses have won both Quarter Horse and Thoroughbred Stake races.



Making Money with Horses is not only the title of one of his books, it is a way of life for him. He began his career as an author, trainer, teacher and trader at 19, and he's still at it – a syndicated column, clinics and lectures, young horses ridden daily, and occasionally he sells a horse.

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