

SPRING PASTURES: FRIEND OR FOE?

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Ahhhhh..... spring and grazing horses!
But pay attention! While the horse on the right, a geriatric, will most likely benefit from the extra nutrients in spring grass, the one on the left should be watched closely for signs of overindulgence, such as laminitis.

Lush green pastures and horses go together like bread and butter, or peas and carrots. So why is it that we see more and more ponies and horses being denied access to pasture? It can be very disheartening to see these ponies yearning for a blade of grass.

What is the reasoning behind this? Aren't horses and ponies supposed to graze? The answer is yes, but as we have all heard before, "Too much of a good thing is a bad thing."

Lush green pastures can become a problem for horses and ponies as they consume mass quantities of the tasty spring grass in a short period of time. The green grass provides an abundant supply of soluble carbohydrates, or simple sugars/starch, that is easily digested by the horse. This high concentration of sugar can upset the normal bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract, resulting in "cow pie" manure or even diarrhea, colic, and laminitis.

Laminitis and founder are painful and potentially devastating diseases. Laminitis is a complex and in-depth disease, but put simply, it is when lamina in the hoof separate, resulting in the loss of connection between the inner hoof wall and the coffin bone inside the hoof. Laminitis causes varying degrees of foot pain, with characteristics ranging from stiffness and "treading" (a notable lameness), to reluctance to move and unrelenting pain in which the horse or pony spends a lot of time lying down.

Our overweight horses and ponies, or those called "easy keepers," are more prone to developing a grass-induced laminitis than their more svelt cousins. The chubby group of equines is easily recognized: middle-aged, obese, cresty-necked, and with thick fat deposition over withers and tail head. They may have an enlarged or thick prepuce, and most likely a prominent crease down their backs. These horses/ponies have a metabolic or endocrine disorder currently labeled "equine metabolic syndrome" and/or insulin resistance.

The high sugar content in the spring grass is a dynamic factor

contributing to obesity and in triggering laminitis. On the flip side, lush spring pastures can be a blessing to some, especially some geriatric horses and those horses that lost weight over the winter. The spring grass is soft and easily masticated/chewed and is abundant in those simple sugars. These sugars/starches can quickly put weight and bloom on horses that didn't fare so well over the rough winter.

So the green pastures can be our friend, by easing our hay bill as we watch our horses move about grazing green grass. But close attention should be taken, as a veterinary visit could be lurking.

Some suggestions:

Slowly let horses get acclimated to the spring grasses by providing only a few hours of grazing time per day and then gradually increasing the exposure time.

Next, research has demonstrated that the sugar content in grass is highest during the day and that at night the sugars are stored in the root system. Therefore, horses and ponies with a laminitis risk, or of becoming overweight, may benefit from grazing only at night.

Another suggestion for the "easy keepers" is a grazing muzzle, to help limit their grass intake.

And finally, there is an unfortunate group of horses and ponies that benefit from dry lot or no exposure to grass, as the lush grass can cause more harm than good. Yours may be one of them!

It is advisable to contact your veterinarian to discuss your horse's or pony's potential risk factor on grass. An examination by your veterinarian is warranted if your horse or pony becomes lame or stiff, lies down more than normal, exhibits signs of colic or diarrhea, or is excessively overweight. The sooner these health concerns are identified and treated, the better the outcome may be.

So we welcome spring with open hands, but we might want to keep a tight rein on our horses as they graze the green grass.