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What makes a horse yawn?

by: Mary DeLorey, DVM

Question: I would like to know what makes a horse pull his mouth as if he is yawning. Does this help the horse get lots of air in his lungs as with people? Is it a sign of anything in particular?

Answer: Unfortunately, there is no simple answer that explains why a horse "yawns." There are some veterinary medical professionals that firmly believe that the behavior we attribute to yawning in the horse is actually a manifestation of pain or discomfort.

Some believe that so strongly that they propose that a horse *only* "yawns" when he is uncomfortable. Certainly, many horses will "yawn" when experiencing colic pain, but no one knows precisely why the horse responds this way or what the "yawn" might do to make him feel better.

Horses also might "yawn" if they have oral pain, and some horses "yawn" just after removing the bridle, presumably to stretch jaw muscles. At one time, many hypothesized that the horse might be trying to equalize pressure inside the inner ear much like humans often do when driving in the mountains or riding in airplanes.

This has not been proven.

We have all seen our horses "yawning" while seemingly happy and quiet in their stalls or pens. And sometimes horses will "yawn" close to meal times as if they are anxiously anticipating their hay or grain. With so many seemingly contradicting triggers, it is very hard to imagine a single cause for "yawning."

About the only thing we're fairly sure of is that the trigger is not the same as that of a yawn in humans, which is in response to transient drops in blood oxygen levels.

That big intake of fresh air increases oxygen in the lungs and therefore in the vascular system. However, horses do not appear to be inhaling when they "yawn."

The most important thing to keep in mind if your horse seems to be yawning inappropriately is that it can often be a sign of abdominal pain. Take quick stock of the situation and make sure there are no other signs of colic.

If you have doubts, observe your horse closely for a few minutes and if you still have questions, call your veterinarian. Most times when your horse "yawns," however, he is likely to be just fine and doing what horses do.



A special story of Courage, Hope and Trust – Sandi Leigh Norris

In our November newsletter we asked for your inspiring story. Thank you to Sandi Leigh Norris for her contribution which reminds us all why we are so emotionally involved with our horses. Our next newsletter will feature another inspiring story from one of our readers.

I am a para dressage rider and this is the story of my horse and me and our journey over the last two years. He never had anything physically wrong with him as I did, but he was as broken as I was in heart and soul. After 10 years of doubt, and feeling lost in the world.... we found one other, touched each other's lives and saved one another from a lonely existence!!!

Hi,

My name is Arabian Ace. I am a Bay Thoroughbred and have just had my 11th birthday.

I started out life as a race horse, but due to a terrible hoof condition, I had to stop racing and was rested for months while my hoof regenerated.

I was then sold off to a new home, but the last 5 years are a bit blurry! I was never lucky and always ended up moving around and leaving my friends behind.

At a jumping yard, I never liked the thought of jumping over scary fences and I had grown tired of people forcing me to jump, so I became naughty and refused to do anything so my owner decided to sell me.

I had lost all confidence in people at this stage and so I began to threaten them with teeth gnashing, swinging my hindquarters towards them and threatening to bite and kick!

Then came the day that changed my life forever!

It was a hot and sunny day and when my groom came to tack me up and all I could think was "Oh boy...who is going to yank me in the mouth and kick me in the ribs today?"

As I was lead up to the arena, I noticed a young girl looking rather nervous! She came up to me and I noticed there was something different about this girl. She did not walk like the rest of them... she had a limp and a sadness in her eyes. I then realised that she had been in a terrible accident and could not ride like other people. She finally got to me and whispered sweet kind words of reassurance to me!

She was helped on to my back and I could feel the nervousness in every move she made. She asked me to walk on... so I did... she asked me to trot... so I did. While trying to find some excuse to behave like the mean horse I had become, something changed, and I could feel how much she NEEDED me! I felt like I had found a friend.

A few days later, she visited again and the next thing I knew, we were off to a new home. At first, I could not believe my good fortune as I knew that good things never lasted. I began to disappear into myself and to totally disconnect from the world. I would not get back in to a horse box for 6 months, testing her, and waiting for her to become like the rest of them. But she never raised a hand or spoke mean words to me.

Now, after 2 years of being together I am a happier, healthier horse who loves my work (even the horsebox). We are an AWESOME team and I trust now that she will never put me in harm's way... and I have given her her freedom back!! I love to make her proud by competing in the "Able-bodied" Novice Dressage classes and even winning!

She is also happier and healthier and we love spending as much time together as possible!!!

Sandi-Leigh Norris



Is my horse feed too expensive?

With the prevailing tough economic climate which has resulted in an influx of enquiries about the best value for money products on the market, we have decided to place this updated article again!

When it comes to horse food, being cheap can be expensive!

When a bag of quality feed is R10 more expensive than the budget alternative it does raise eyebrows. When the price difference is R20 or more, most horse owners will query whether this is value for money. Interestingly, however, even discrepancies greater than these can become savings!

When it comes to choosing a concentrate for your horse, opting for the bag with the budget price often turns out to be the expensive decision in the long run! Not only does it often cost more in terms of Rands per month to feed cheap concentrates, but the negatives also add up in terms of poor performance, poor condition, the cost of additional supplements, greater quantities fed and the possibility of additional veterinary bills which completely tip the scales.

When selecting your horse feed, you should do so in the manner you would select a veterinarian for your horse. Most horse owners choose a veterinarian based on the quality of service provided, not the price charged for this highly professional work. Your horse's nutrition should be no less important.

There are many different feeds available on the market today and, without exception, cheaper feeds tend to contain a lot more fillers and less of the better quality ingredients. The differences in nutritional value between different feeds are significant and, generally, you get what you pay for.

Contrary to popular belief, the most expensive component of horse feed is not protein but rather the total energy value. Other important factors which add to the end price of better quality concentrates are:

- the amount and type of oils used
- the quality of the vitamins and minerals added
- the selection of starches incorporated
- the addition of a live yeast culture
- the quality and quantity of the fibres used in the composition.

The correct inclusion of essential Vitamin B and E alone can easily add R4-00 per bag, a live yeast culture up to R8-00/bag and the inclusion of good quality oils can bump the cost up to more than R10-00 per bag. Just these 3 ingredients alone can account for more than R20-00 per bag but in the long run, however, will save money, improve performance and ensure that riding, breeding, training or any other equine activity can be fully enjoyed.

Horses are no longer kept for transportation, but rather, because we are passionate about them and equine related sports. Attempting to save R2.00 per day, thus, only to have a horse contract tendons, boggy hocks, tying up, laminitis or dangerous colic, all related to the choice of feed, becomes nonsensical.

It must be noted that where a horse is fed, for example, 4kg per day, the difference in feeding costs between a budget feed at R125/50kg compared to a much higher quality product priced at R150/50kg (ie.R25 more per bag) will be R2.00 per day. This becomes a negligible amount when compared to the cost of treating a bad colic, not to mention the costs of added supplements, impaired performance and the additional quantity required for feeding.

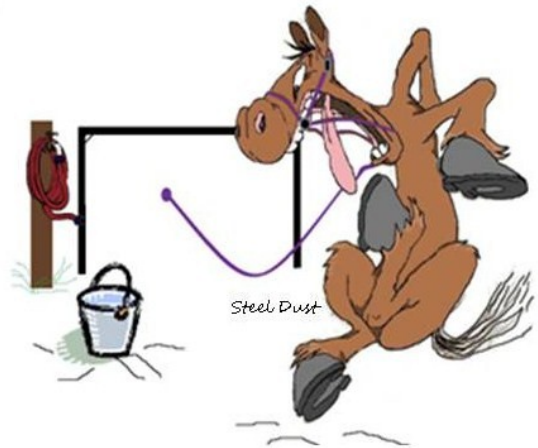
GUIDELINES FOR CHOOSING HORSE FEED COST EFFECTIVELY!

Always study the bag tag!

Choice of concentrate has a major cost implication on the upkeep of your horse, hence the importance of studying the bag tag and also of researching all further information provided on the website of any product you use.

Do not make the mistake of stopping your research at the advertised protein level as the protein level *per se* does not tell the whole story. When comparing products it is important to study factors such as energy value, yeast addition, specified vitamin/mineral levels, the use of organic minerals, fat percentage, the type of oils added and specified amino acids such as lysine.

You will usually notice a vast difference in the amount of information offered on the top end products as compared to budget lines which tend to specify only the minimum values as required by law. Keep in mind that this law was passed way back in 1947 and requires the declaration of certain minimum percentages of Protein, Moisture, Fat, Calcium, Phosphorous and Fibre only.



These are the bare minimum requirements on very few nutrient factors and it is not a difficult task to mix these limited requirements, bag them, and then sell them at an ultra low price.

Look at the product:

Always remember that horses have been eating grass for approximately the last 55 million years. Together, the caecum and the large intestine are more than 5 meters in length with a capacity of about 80 litres forming the horse's "fermentation chamber". What looks appetizing to you is most certainly not what is healthy for your horse.

Horses need fibre, and lots of it, to maintain good digestive health. Even though hay is offered on the side, it is still important to have additional quality fibres in a concentrate. This ensures that as the feed moves through the digestive system there are never any sections of the gut fill without a fibre component. Because fibre generally provides less energy than grains, more expensive, top range concentrates always feature a higher fat percentage to compensate for the volume taken up by the fibre, but still achieve the required energy density.

If you prefer using pellets, break them apart and have a good look at the contents, preferably with a small magnifying glass. Budget feeds hide large quantities of fillers such as bran in their pellets. This can easily be seen as the contents are much finer and without a diversity of components. It is very important to also have enough fibre in pelleted products. These fibres should be visible and not milled to a powder, hence the importance of larger cubes, because effective longer fibre will not pass mechanically through the smaller diameter machinery.

Products can easily be made to look appetizing and taste nice by adding loads of molasses. This, however, is not good for your horse! Rather, feel for an oily residue on your hand after handling the feed, indicating a good fat content. If changing products, allow your horse time to be weaned off these "nice looking" high molasses, high grain based products. As with children who prefer candy to All Bran, their energy levels will fluctuate and then run out!

Make the calculations:

Because bags come in different sizes (usually 22.5, 40 or 50kg), the actual price per bag means nothing! There are only two factors to consider in your calculation:

The price per kg of feed
The amount of feed required per day.

The price per kg of feed is of course simple mathematics. If a 40kg bag costs R160-00, the price per kg is R4-00 ($160 \div 40 = 4$), which is the same per kg as the bag costing R90-00 but only weighing 22,5kg ($90 \div 22,5 = 4$).

The amount of a specific product required per day can only be determined after at least 6 weeks of use. Quality products can usually be fed in smaller quantities while still maintaining condition and performance. Rather feed less of a good quality concentrate, but more hay! Your horse will look better and, in the long term, your veterinary bills will certainly be less!

All things considered, the difference in value between a bag costing R160-00 and the one costing R185-00 is actually a lot more than the R25-00 difference. Sometimes spending a little bit more per bag can reduce the overall cost of keeping a horse simply by ensuring that the horse is healthier. He will, however, also look better, perform better and consume less concentrate. Note that feeding a horse 4kg per day of the "expensive" R185-00/bag feed will still work out cheaper than feeding 5kg of the cheaper R160-00/bag feed.

Don't forget the additives:

Feeding budget lines often requires the addition of all sorts of supplements. These include oils, vitamin packs, electrolytes, anti-colic remedies etc. Keep in mind that if you are feeding 5kg of a R160/bag feed, and you are adding supplements worth R3-10 per day, you are spending as much as you would be if you were feeding the same amount of a top quality feed costing R25/bag more (R185/bag). If you used the more expensive ration, however, you would probably only need 4kg per day, and this saving, together with the saving on the supplements, would contribute to a significant overall saving of R4-62 per day or R140/month/horse.

Also bear in mind that adding all sorts of supplements to support budget line products can lead to imbalances in the ration which create other problems. Good rules to follow are not to mix fortified commercial rations or supplements, and also not to mix fortified commercial rations with oats or other grains unless the feeding instructions permit it.

The Equus Range of Products.

None of the products in the **Equus** range have been specifically developed to compete in price *per se* with any of the budget line products available. There is however a continuous flow of testimonials from customers who testify that **Equus** products offer better value for money than what they have previously experienced.

See www.equusfeeds.co.za to read more about the *Equus* range of products.