Proceedings of the British Equine Veterinary Association Congress
BEVA

Sep. 11 – 14, 2013
Manchester, United Kingdom

Next Congress:

10-13 September 2014 – Birmingham, UK

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Feeding horses with colic essentially falls into 2 main areas of veterinary involvement: firstly, nutritional advice provided as a preventative or mitigating strategy when an increased risk of colic is perceived in a horse or group of horses; and secondly, the nutritional management of individual horses following abdominal surgery for colic. Although many of the basic principles are shared between the 2 scenarios, this presentation will primarily focus on the former.

Colic is a diverse syndrome potentially caused by many different disease processes that may arise for different reasons and from different origins within the abdomen. Therefore although some dietary strategies might reduce the risk of colic in general, it is unlikely that all colic subtypes will be reduced by any one course of action. It is also possible that dietary changes intended to reduce the risk of one cause of colic, might increase the risk of another.

Horses have evolved in association with a high-fibre, low-starch diet composed primarily of grasses, rushes and sedges, gradually consumed over about 16 h per day. Changes in dietary quality would be slow and gradual. The ideal diet for equine gastrointestinal (GI) health is likely to be mimicked that for which horses have evolved, but it is also clear that dietary management of most horses now differs substantially from this. Gastrointestinal health is generally facilitated by a stable and constant microbiota although this is susceptible to change depending on the quantity and quality of ingesta. Many colic episodes can be attributed to alterations in bacterial populations resulting from management practices such as feeding large concentrate/cereal ‘meals’, varying grazing time and other dietary changes.

High-starch feeds are commonly fed to domestic horses but are unlikely to have been present in the diet of equine ancestors from which the modern horse evolved. Cereals are not a normal feed for horses and, in comparison with other animals, horses have a very poor ability to digest dietary starch. Undigested starch will arrive in the large intestine where it is rapidly fermented and causes adverse changes in the microbiota and pH. Where cereal-based feeds are considered essential, it is logical to offer small meals so manipulating the diet towards that for which the equine GI tract is best adapted.

Further reading


