

Spotting that a feed is not right for your horse is often about patterns, not one-off moments. A horse may look fine for a day or two after a feed change, then gradually show signs of digestive upset, altered energy levels, or changes in coat and condition score. Understanding these symptoms early can help you act before a small dietary issue becomes a bigger welfare concern.

Not every reaction **overweight horse feed** means a true horse feed intolerance, and not every problem is caused by the current ration. But if the signs appear soon after a feed change, or they continue despite stable management, the feed itself becomes a strong possibility. A careful look at forage, hard feed, concentrates, and the overall nutrient profile can reveal whether the diet is supporting digestive health or causing a dietary imbalance.

What happens when a horse feed doesn't agree with your horse?

When a horse feed doesn't suit your horse, the digestive system is often the first place you notice it. The gut microbiome depends on a steady supply of digestible fibre and a sensible balance of starch, sugar, and protein. If the feed is too rich, too sudden, or simply poor in digestibility, the horse may struggle to process it comfortably.

Some horses show a clear feed sensitivity with obvious digestive upset, while others show quieter signs such as reduced palatability, flatter energy, or subtle behavioural changes. A horse may not have a true allergic reaction, but may still react badly to an unsuitable feed because of its ingredient list, nutrient profile, or how much starch and sugar it contains.

A feed change should always be managed gradually transition rather than abruptly. If the digestive system is forced to adapt too quickly, the gut microbiome can be disrupted, increasing the risk of loose droppings, colic, and general discomfort. In practical terms, this means watching the horse closely for changes in eating habits, droppings, behaviour, and condition after any new feed is introduced.

Common physical signs the feed may be unsuitable

Physical symptoms often give the clearest clues that the diet is not working. These signs may appear slowly, so it helps to keep an eye on the horse's body condition, droppings, and general comfort level over time.

Weight loss can indicate the ration is not providing enough usable energy or nutrients, or that the horse is not digesting the feed well. In some cases, poor digestibility means the horse is technically eating enough but not extracting what it needs from the feed. If forage intake is adequate but condition still drops, the hard feed or concentrates may be the issue.

Weight gain can also point to an unsuitable feed, especially if the ration is too calorie-dense or too high in sugar and starch for the horse's workload. A horse that gains weight quickly after a feed change may be receiving more energy than needed, or the diet may be upsetting normal appetite regulation. That does not always mean the feed is "bad", but it may not match the horse's current requirements.

Loose droppings are another common sign. Slight variation can happen for many reasons, but persistent loose droppings after a feed change often suggest the digestive system is under stress. The horse may be reacting to a sudden change in fibre source, a higher starch load, or a feed that is simply harder to digest than expected.

Colic is a more serious warning sign. Not every colic episode is feed-related, but if pain, pawing, rolling, or gut discomfort follows the introduction of a new feed, the ration must be reviewed immediately. Colic can reflect poor gut health, excess starch, inadequate roughage, or a rapid feed change that has disturbed normal digestion.

Other physical clues can include a reduced appetite, slower eating, or a horse leaving hard feed behind. If the feed has poor palatability, the horse may not consume enough of it to maintain condition. That may also happen if the feed does not match the horse's natural preference for forage-based roughage.

Behavioural changes linked to an unsuitable diet

Behavioural changes can be just as important as physical symptoms. A horse that suddenly feels different to ride or handle may be responding to the feed's effect on energy release, comfort, or digestion.

Fizzy behaviour is often linked to rations high in sugar and starch. Some horses become sharper, more reactive, or harder to settle when the diet includes too much rapid-release energy. This does not necessarily mean the horse has too much energy overall; it may mean the energy source is not appropriate for that individual's metabolic response.

Lethargy can happen at the other end of the scale. If a horse seems flat, sluggish, or unusually tired after a feed change, the ration may not be supplying enough usable nutrients, or it may be causing digestive discomfort that lowers energy levels. A diet that looks balanced on paper may still fail in practice if the ingredients are poorly suited to the horse.

Irritability may show up during grooming, tacking up, or riding. This can be a sign of discomfort, frustration, or an underlying digestive issue. Horses are often sensitive to changes in routine, and when an unsuitable feed affects the gut microbiome or causes mild distress, the result can be grumpiness or resistance.

The link with sugar and starch matters here. Horses that are sensitive to higher levels of these nutrients may show more pronounced behavioural changes, especially if the hard feed or concentrates are heavily cereal-based. Some horses do better on a forage-led ration with lower starch and a more controlled energy source.

It is worth looking at the full pattern rather than a single bad day. If the horse is consistently more excitable, more tired, or more difficult to work after the feed change, the diet deserves scrutiny.

Skin, coat and hoof clues to watch for

Feed suitability can also show up in the skin, coat, and hooves. These are slower-moving indicators, so they are easy to overlook, but they often reveal whether the diet is supporting long-term equine health.

A **dull coat** can suggest the diet is not supplying enough digestible nutrients, essential fats, or protein for healthy coat condition. It may also point to poor overall digestibility, meaning the horse is not making proper use of what is being fed. If a coat loses shine after a feed change, review the nutrient profile and whether the ration contains enough quality forage and balanced hard feed.

Itchiness can have many causes, including seasonal issues and external irritants, but feed-related causes should not be dismissed. Some horses react to certain ingredients with skin irritation, or may have an allergic reaction that affects the coat and skin. If the itchiness begins around the same time as a new feed, look closely at the ingredient list and whether the diet has become more complex.

Hoof quality is another useful clue. Poor hoof growth, brittleness, cracking, or reduced horn quality may **fast delivery horse feed online** reflect an unsuitable diet, especially if the horse is not getting enough balanced fibre, minerals, and protein. Since hooves grow slowly, changes take time to appear, but a poor ration can eventually show through in weak hoof structure.

These signs do not always mean a feed is the only issue, but they are important parts of the overall picture. If the coat, skin, and hooves all decline after a feed change, it is sensible to question whether the diet is meeting the

horse's needs.

How to tell if the issue is the feed or something else

Because the symptoms of feed problems overlap with many other conditions, careful investigation matters. Good decision-making starts with asking whether the timing fits. Did the signs begin after the feed change, or were they already present?

Seek **veterinary advice** if the horse is showing pain, severe digestive upset, repeated colic, or a sudden drop in condition. These signs can point to more than feed sensitivity. Parasites, dental pain, ulcers, and medical conditions can all mimic an issue with the ration.

Parasites may cause weight loss, loose droppings, poor coat quality, or a generally unthrifty appearance. A horse with a heavy burden may also seem dull or off colour, which can be mistaken for a diet problem.

Dentistry matters because a horse that cannot chew forage properly may not get enough value from hay, haylage, or hard feed. Poor chewing reduces digestibility and can create a picture that looks like feed intolerance when the real issue is dental discomfort.

Ulcers can cause irritability, poor appetite, changes in condition, and behavioural changes under saddle. Because ulcers also affect appetite and comfort, they are commonly confused with a poor reaction to concentrates or a high-starch diet.

A practical approach is to compare the horse's symptoms against the feed timeline and other management factors. If the problem persists regardless of feed adjustments, the cause may be broader than the ration. If the issue improves when the feed is changed, that strengthens the case for an unsuitable feed or dietary imbalance.

What to do if you suspect the feed is wrong

If you suspect the feed is not right, avoid making several changes at once. A methodical feed trial gives you the clearest information and helps protect digestive health.

First, use a **gradual transition** if any new feed is introduced. Sudden changes can upset the gut microbiome and create symptoms that make it hard to know whether the feed is unsuitable or simply too new. When replacing a ration, overlap feeds carefully so the horse adapts step by step.

Keep a **feed diary**. Record what the horse eats, how much forage is offered, whether the horse is on hay or haylage, and any changes in hard feed or concentrates. Add notes about droppings, appetite, energy levels, condition score, and behaviour. A diary helps reveal trends that are easy to miss day to day.

Rebuild the ration around a **forage-first diet**. Most horses do best when forage forms the foundation, with hay or haylage providing roughage and supporting gut function. Hard feed should complement, not replace, fibre. If the horse is sensitive, simplifying the ration can reduce the chance of feed sensitivity being triggered by too many ingredients.

A **nutritional analysis** of forage can also be helpful. Knowing the nutrient profile of hay or haylage makes it easier to judge whether the horse truly needs extra concentrates, or whether the forage already meets most requirements. This reduces the risk of dietary imbalance and makes feed selection more precise.

If possible, review the feed label and ingredient list carefully. Check the levels of starch, sugar, fibre, and protein, and consider whether the feed suits your horse's work, temperament, and digestive health. Sometimes the issue is not the concept of the feed, but a mismatch between the nutrient profile and the horse's needs.

When to speak to your vet or nutritionist

Some cases can be resolved with careful observation and a well-managed feed change, but other cases need professional input. If symptoms are persistent, worsening, or linked to discomfort, speak to an **equine nutritionist** or a vet.

Persistent symptoms such as loose droppings, weight loss, dull coat, poor hoof quality, irritability, or lethargy should not be ignored. When they continue despite a sensible diet review, there may be an underlying issue that needs investigation.

Blood tests may be recommended if there is concern about inflammation, infection, metabolic disease, or other medical conditions affecting condition and behaviour. They can help rule out problems that look like feed intolerance but are actually medical in origin.

Bifid UK

+44 800 422 0888

sales@bifid.co.uk

<https://bifid.com/uk/>

An **equine nutritionist** can assess the full ration, including forage, hay, haylage, hard feed, and concentrates, and help you understand whether the current nutrient profile matches the horse's needs. They can also guide a more structured diet review and feed trial.

Professional advice is especially important if the horse has known medical conditions, repeated colic, or a history of poor tolerance to certain ingredients. In these cases, the welfare risk is higher, and the feeding plan needs to be particularly careful.

If your horse is showing a clear change in appetite, behaviour, digestion, or body condition after a feed change, treat it as useful information. The sooner you identify the pattern, the easier it is to protect equine welfare and make a better feeding decision.

FAQs about horse feed sensitivity and intolerance

What are the first signs that a horse feed does not suit my horse?

The first signs are often subtle: a change in appetite, altered droppings, a drop in energy levels, mild digestive upset, or a shift in behaviour. Some horses show fizziness, others become lethargic, and some simply lose or gain condition. Watching for patterns after a feed change is the best way to spot trouble early.

How long should I wait before deciding a new feed is unsuitable?

That depends on the horse and the symptoms. Some reactions appear quickly, while others take longer to show through in condition, coat, or droppings. If signs are mild, keep a feed diary and allow time for a proper gradual transition. If the horse develops colic, significant loose droppings, or obvious distress, do not wait.

Can a horse feed cause behavioural changes?

Yes. A feed that is high in sugar and starch can contribute to fizzy behaviour, while a ration that does not suit the horse can also lead to lethargy or irritability. Behavioural changes are often linked to energy release, digestibility, or discomfort in the digestive system, so they should always be considered alongside physical signs.

What should I check on the feed label if my horse reacts badly?

Check the ingredient list, starch and sugar levels, fibre content, protein level, and overall nutrient profile. Also consider whether the feed includes ingredients your horse has reacted to before. If the label suggests a high-energy or cereal-heavy ration, it may not suit a horse that needs a forage-led, lower-starch approach. A horse feed company uk can often help explain the label and compare options.

When should I contact a vet about a possible feed intolerance?

Contact a vet if the horse shows colic, severe digestive upset, repeated loose droppings, marked weight loss, or any sign of pain or sudden deterioration. You should also seek veterinary advice if symptoms persist despite removing the suspected feed, or if you are unsure whether the problem is dietary or related to parasites, dentistry, ulcers, or another medical condition.