

## WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

- Know basic rules for feeding.*
- Be able to identify good and bad hay, grain, and water.*

**OBJECTIVE:** One of our goals for Red Level students is for them to acquire enough knowledge that they can spend time at the barn and **be a helper instead of a liability**. This means students need a basic introduction to feeds and feeding—a subject where a careless mistake can cost you money at best, and at worst, a horse's life.

**The most important concept to get across at this Level is that horses have a particular and delicate digestive process**, and that anything that upsets this process can have disastrous consequences. Red Level students should know the fundamental rules, but also have an appreciation for **how much they don't know yet**. They should begin developing attention to detail, such as the funky smell coming from a flake of hay, and be able to **recognize common colic triggers** such as spoiled feed, hay strings, grain overload, and poorly-timed feeding.

Ideally, you want students to be able to discuss these concepts well enough that they can communicate the knowledge to others. However, this amount of verbalizing can be intimidating for many Red Level students. We recommend that you use physical prompts, ask leading questions, and allow students to demonstrate their understanding using hands-on methods whenever possible.

**CHECKING IT OFF:** While feeding is an everyday occurrence in most barns, you will probably have to block out specific times for students to gain hands-on experience in the feed room. This can be taught as a rainy day lesson, during the unmounted portion of a camp schedule, as a specialty clinic, or as part of a working student orientation. Basic feeding concepts can be reviewed with regular students during a warm-up walk, cool-down, or mid-lesson break.

**You'll know they've got it:** if they can list at least five rules for feeding, with an understanding of the consequences for breaking each rule. If presented with samples of good and bad hay or grain, they should be able to identify what is and is not safe to feed. Students should also be able to discuss ways of determining quality of hay, grain, and water sources.



### LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:

*"Carrots are a popular treat for horses. How would you feed a horse a carrot? Why do you think it is safer to slice it up first?"*

*"Have you ever tried to exercise right after a heavy meal? How did your stomach feel?"*

*"If we eat food that has spoiled, we can get rid of the bad food by throwing up. Can a horse do this? What happens if he eats moldy hay or grain?"*

*"What are two nutrients the horse must have access to at all times?"*

FEED  
LITTLE  
AND  
OFTEN!

## WHAT GOES IN MUST COME OUT

Although Red Level students are not *required* to explain the reasons behind the rules, we find it helpful to give them a **visual tour of a horse's digestive process** as part of their initial feeding lesson. The size of a horse's stomach in relation to his body makes a much greater impact when seen; the length of the small intestine is always an eye-opener when measured out!

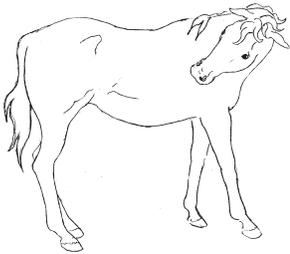
There are several excellent posters, videos and visual models available that show the equine digestive system. You can **make your own simulation** simply and inexpensively, using household items that can be arranged in the correct order by the students themselves. We suggest a length of flexible tubing for the esophagus, a football for the stomach, a 60'-70' length of soft rope for the small intestine, partially inflated balloons for the hind gut (empty a yeast packet into each one to represent the "friendly" bacteria), and a short, thick piece of hose or tubing for the small colon/rectum.

If you are fortunate enough to have an equine skull with all its teeth, you can start the tour there. If not, you can demonstrate the chewing process by mashing up a piece of carrot. We've used a kitchen meat tenderizer (the hand-held variety) to replicate the horse's molars.

**When it comes to rules of any kind, students need to know the reasons why.**

For this reason, Red Level students should have a discussion about **colic** and why it can be so serious.

Explain the causes and complications of colic, emphasizing that while colic is not always fatal, **the best treatment is prevention**. We hope that none of your beginner students have the opportunity to witness a colic in action, but you undoubtedly have experienced it yourself, and can provide a cautionary tale. (Our sad story involves a well-meaning but ignorant family feeding moldy hay to their beautiful young mare. It was a cold night; the mare ate most of it and died before the vet could arrive the following morning.)



## PROMPT BUCKET

Several of the items used to portray the equine digestive system can be used as **prompts**. As when teaching Horse Safety, we find that students often have difficulty organizing a long list of rules in their head, and benefit from visual prompts to jog their memory. These can be included in your horse safety **prompt bucket** or you can keep a separate collection for feeding rules. A few items we have used:

-  **A small dry erase feed chart** (keep a written chart to ensure correct feeding)
-  **A football** (relative size of stomach; feed little and often)
-  **A piece of flexible tubing** with a **carrot** lodged inside (feed small treats to avoid choke)
-  **A large plastic rat**—this one's an attention getter! (keep feed in secure storage bins behind closed doors)
-  **A small dustpan with broom** (clean up spilled feed)
-  **A watch** (keep a consistent feeding schedule, OR feed an hour before and after a workout)
-  **A Ziploc baggie of dusty, moldy or weedy hay** (feed only good-quality hay and grain)
-  **A water bottle** (provide continual access to clean water)
-  **Two different feed tags, stapled together** (change between gradually)



### HAY IS FOR HORSES

Many beginners only have a vague idea of what horses actually eat. Introduce students to some basic equine food groups: essential **nutrients** (salt and water), **roughage** (grass and hay), **concentrates** (grain and supplements) and **treats** (succulents). Emphasize that this is the order of importance!

Ideally, you should be able to provide visual examples of all of these foodstuffs. We recommend keeping a box filled with feed samples. You'll get plenty of use out of it when teaching more advanced concepts in later Levels, and in a pinch it can provide a great rainy day lesson. Include several different types of hay separated in Ziploc baggies—our collection includes **alfalfa, fescue, Bermuda, stemmy/coarse hay, weedy hay,** and **moldy hay.** You can also create samples of **fresh grass** or **clover,** but those will have to be tossed and refreshed for every lesson as they won't store well in the plastic bags! For grains, bag up some **sweet feed, pelleted feed, senior/complete feed, whole grains** (such as oats, barley and corn), **bran, a pelleted/powdered supplement,** and **moldy grain.** Samples of **beet pulp** and **forage** pellets are useful when teaching the difference between roughage and concentrates. Include a chunk of **salt block** and pack all of it in a box with a secure lid.



**On a rainy day...** mix up the feed bags in a large pile and ask students to sort them into the correct food groups. The bags can also be sorted into "Good feed" and "Bad feed," assuming you have several samples of spoiled or poor-quality hay and grain. (These bags are some of the most important of the collection, since most barns dispose of bad hay or feed immediately - and rightfully so!)

### TAKE A TOUR

Give Red Level students a **guided tour** of your feed storage areas, preferably starting with the most important items: **how does the horse get water? Does he have continual access to both water and salt?** Have students check that buckets and troughs are clean (and scrub them as necessary!) and test that automatic waterers are flowing. If there is natural water on the property, ask them how they would evaluate it and if they think it is safe for the horses to drink.

Move on to the hay storage and discuss the difference between **square bales** and **round bales,** particularly if you use both. **Show them what a flake is**—we are often entertained during scavenger hunts by asking for a flake of hay and being presented with a single blade of grass! Let them feel the difference between a "fat" flake and a "slender" flake to illustrate the importance of feeding by weight instead of volume.

**Sniff everything.** This is particularly helpful if you have samples of spoiled hay to compare - but make sure students only get a quick whiff of anything dusty or moldy, since prolonged exposure is unhealthy! Discuss the **dangers of hay strings** and have students dispose of every loose string they can find.

Finish by moving onto the feed room. Ask students to match the grain in the bins with the **feed chart** (if your feed setup is not clearly organized and labeled, they will be sure to point it out!) and to touch and smell everything. Show how the word **"scoop"** can mean several different things by comparing your supplement and grain scoops. Open a new bag of grain to show students how to check it before feeding. (**Does the grain pass the sniff test? Any insects? Any signs of excess moisture or mold?**)



## DINNER IS SERVED

Once students are familiar with basic feeding rules and the layout of your feed storage, **invite them to come participate in a routine feeding**. This can be a good activity to open or a close a camp day, or an option for students scheduled for evening lessons, depending on your feeding schedule. Have students clean and refill water buckets as necessary, portion out hay and/or fill haynets, and prepare grain and/or supplements, all **under direct supervision**. Before delivering any hay or grain, ask students: **is this safe to feed? How do you know?**

If horses are fed in pasture stations, or act hostile toward neighboring horses in the stall, this is a great opportunity to discuss **herd behavior**. Who is the dominant horse in the pecking order? Who is the most submissive? How do these horses behave toward the others? How do horses act differently in the presence of food? Why might it be a bad idea to try to interact with a horse who sees his dinner coming? Of course, **students should never be put in a position where a slow reaction would cause them harm**—keep them out of stalls and pastures where loose horses are being fed, and deliver dinner to any aggressive horses yourself!

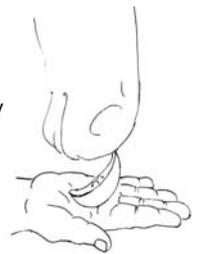


**On a rainy day...** combine this exercise with a lesson in mucking out. We often use this structure in summer day camp or as an unmounted Rising Rider lesson, explaining to students that the horse or pony is theirs for a day and they need to provide routine care.

## TRICKS FOR TREATS

Of course, the feeding rule most students are interested in is the one involving **treats**. Hand-feeding treats can be a controversial practice. Since it is often a student's favorite pastime, make sure you establish your ground rules up front and review them frequently.

At HorseSense, the majority of our school horses are trained using clicker training principles. Contrary to popular belief, this does not make the horses nippy or greedy, but actually makes them less so, as it teaches the horse to wait respectfully for the sound of their cue before expecting the treat. As students regularly witness us feeding treats by hand, we allow it, but **ONLY under certain conditions**:



-  The student must **ask permission** first, and have their choice of treat approved. (Not all horses can have sugar!)
-  They must **award the treat under supervision**, after demonstrating a safe method of delivering it.
-  The horse must remain out of their personal space bubble and **wait respectfully**. Pushy behavior = no treat.
-  If in doubt, **the treat should be placed in a feed bucket** instead of delivering by hand.

If possible, we like the horse to "earn" the treat by yielding to the student in some way first. Horse cookies or packaged treats are fine in moderation; apples, carrots and alfalfa cubes are allowed **if broken into small pieces** so the horse doesn't choke. Peppermints are permitted as **occasional** treats, but make *sure* the wrappers end up in the trash!

When teaching a student to feed a treat by hand, it is a good idea to keep your own hand under theirs until they gain confidence. Many children snatch their hand away at the initial contact; aside from the treat ending up in the dirt, this can teach the horse to dive after it, resulting in accidentally nipped fingers. Encourage students to **push** the treat against the horse's lips instead, and to remove their hand only after they are sure the transfer is complete.

**Combine a lesson in horse treat safety with an equine-approved recipe!**

<https://horsesenselearninglevels.com/resource/list-challenges/horse-treat-recipes-mini-quiz/>