

Forage Alternatives for Horses

Marcia Hathaway, University of Minnesota; Krishona Martinson, University of Minnesota-Extension

Fresh (pasture) or harvested (hay) forages are the ideal energy source for horses. When possible, hay and/or pasture should make up a large portion of a horse's diet. When these traditional forages are not available or in short supply, the following alternatives can replace them in part or in whole when needed.

Last year's hay (baled and stored properly). Hay is high in fiber and bulk, which supports the horse's digestive tract. Nutrition content can be similar to the current year's hay with the exception of vitamins (especially A and E) which are lost during field drying and storage. A vitamin supplement should be fed when feeding older hay.

Hay cubes. Nutritional content of hay cubes is similar to hay and nutrition information should be included on the feed label. Cubes are high in fiber and bulk, which support the horse's digestive tract, and can be used as a total hay replacement. Cubes may have less dust and waste than hay and tend to be easy to handle, transport, and store. Cubes tend to be consumed quickly and may result in horses overeating.



Alfalfa pellets. Nutritional content of alfalfa pellets should be similar to hay and is high in fiber. Pellets may have less dust and waste than hay and can be used as a total replacement. Horses do tend to spend less time eating and may overeat.

Beet pulp. Beet pulp is high in digestible energy, relatively high in calcium, and high in fiber and bulk, which support the horse's digestive tract. It is palatable and can be fed up to 5-10 lbs daily (for healthy, adult horses). It can be used as a partial hay replacement, but you may need to supplement phosphorus to balance calcium.

Vacuum-packed and chopped alfalfa. Nutritional content is similar to alfalfa hay. It's high in fiber and bulk, which support the horse's digestive tract, and can be fed as a total hay replacement. You may need to feed a greater mass than hay. The forage may mold after opening the bag so it should be fed within a few days.

Complete feeds. These feeds are nutritionally balanced, adequate in fiber, and can be used as a total hay replacement. Complete feeds tend to be consumed more quickly than hay and may not have enough total fiber. It's recommended to divide complete feeds into several, small meals each day.

Always consider price, availability, and pros and cons when selecting alternative forages. Make dietary changes slowly over 14 days and consult an equine nutritionist and veterinarian before making major dietary changes. For more information on forage alternatives, visit extension.umn.edu/horse-nutrition/alternative-feedstuffs-horses.