

## WHICH HAY IS RIGHT FOR YOUR HORSE?

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Today we will compare hay by **protein content, digestibility, price, availability**, and of course, their **safety** as horse feed. Before we can discuss these hays specifically, we have to define the words we are using, so that we are not “comparing apples and oranges.”

The hay we discuss today will be in small square bales. Most of the hay processed locally is in round bales. The exception is the hay baled for resale, or specifically for the horse market. The round bales offer the convenience of not having to find hay haulers that will work day and night in the heat of summer until all the hay is in the barn! The round bales can be placed in the pasture and, depending on the number of horses, provide hay for several days. The outside of round bales will have some spoilage if the bale has not been stored under roof, and feeding this hay makes some people uncomfortable. Usually once the outer inch or two has been peeled off, the underlying hay is well preserved. As long as the bale **is consumed within a few days** and **not allowed to decompose** from contact with the elements, it provides a convenient source of hay. Its quality, of course, depends on the hay within and the way it was processed.

The same is true with square bales. We will assume they have been baled from grass that is in early maturity, was allowed adequate “curing” time, and was baled without being rained on. If the hay was baled too “green” or was rained on, there will often be mold within the bale. While this is **usually penicillin** and is not harmful, it **cannot be differentiated from the dangerous molds** and should not be fed.

After drying, some hay is very dusty. This is **more of a health risk than mold**. Every time a horse buries its nose in dusty hay, or picks up a piece and shakes it, there is a cloud of dust. Continuously breathing in dust at such close range **will quickly lead to lung problems**. The short term affects are **acute pneumonia**, with difficult breathing and coughing. The chronic affects are those seen with the condition of “heaves,” or emphysema. This condition is exhibited as difficult breathing because **the lungs are adhered to the inside of the rib cage** and cannot automatically expand and collapse. The patient must actively expand the ribs to allow the lungs to draw in air. This often causes irritation leading to a cough. When excited or stressed, the breathing becomes more labored. **This chronic condition** can be managed with medication, **but never cured**. The image of this condition should reinforce our recommendation: **the hay must be dry and dust free**.

The definitive method for evaluating your hay is have it analyzed. The Extension office of the University of Missouri - and some feed stores - can have **your hay analyzed for a very small cost**. The results will tell you the protein and energy content as well as how digestible this hay is. Along with the look and smell of well processed hay, you can be comfortable Dobbin is receiving a safe and nutritious forage.

We will discuss the more common hays we see in the Ozarks. As we mentioned, they range from straight alfalfa to fescue or cheat cut well past its maturity.

We will start with the **“low end”** quality hay. In our area **this would be fescue or native grasses cut late in their maturity**:

- Their fiber content is very high,
- their relative food value (the information you receive back from the U of MO

Extension Office after they analyze the hay) is low,

- it is inexpensive,
- and the horses do not like it.

They will use it first for bedding, but if the availability of roughage becomes very poor, they will pick at it. If it is *the only food available*, they will eat *massive quantities* in an attempt to satisfy their hunger. They will soon develop *the characteristic "pot gut."* While they look full, there will be little *"fat cushion"* layer over the ribs. As winter progresses, there will be even less cushion, as it is *impossible to eat enough* to maintain their body condition while in a *"negative energy balance."*

After my extended time on this "hay quality" soap box about fescue hay, you may decide you cannot feed any fescue. This is not so. *If the fescue grass was cut while the stem and leaf were young, the resulting hay can have pretty good nutritional values.* The fiber will be lower than the above described hay, which means the horses will like it better and it will have more food value. *You can tell the difference* by looking at a section of the hay. The fescue we were talking about above, an *overly mature hay, will be the color of straw with large coarse stems.* The *better fescue will have a light green color and the leaves and stems will be fine.* This better hay will maintain most adult horses just fine. Of course you will want to stop feeding all fescue to mares in the last two months of pregnancy.

We have certainly filled this column and still have *more fodder to feed!* Next week we will discuss the other hay types you are likely to encounter.