



ASK THE VET

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HAYGAIN
hay steamers

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How does Steaming Affect the Nutrition of Hay?

In an earlier series, we briefly discussed how steaming hay is ideal for adding moisture back into hay, killing mold spores and eliminating dust. At this point, however, we have not yet discussed the effects of steaming on the nutrient profile of hay.

It's known from extensive human research that steaming is the best way to cook your vegetables and maintain the nutrient quality. So it makes sense to infer that the same thing should happen with your horse's vegetables, right? It turns out that this is also true for your horse's hay. Essentially, except for a small (2.3%) decrease in water soluble carbohydrates, the hay bale that you put in the steamer is the same one that you take out.



When soaking hay, you have a much different result. There are usually two main reasons that someone chooses to soak their horse's hay. Either the horse has allergies and/or an airway problem that requires a reduction in dust to protect their airway, or the horse has a metabolic disease that can require the horse to lose weight. Often the hay is soaked to decrease the water soluble carbohydrates (i.e. sugars), which will in turn decrease the caloric intake of the horse, resulting in a reduction in weight. This can be effective for metabolic horses, except that not only do you lose the water soluble carbohydrates from soaking, but other important nutrients as well.

Instead of soaking, I recommend steaming the hay to preserve the nutrient quality. You can also feed your horse a less palatable hay (e.g. timothy hay) versus a nice fresh grass cut hay (e.g. orchard grass) to encourage them to continue eating (as a horse should), while consuming less calories with each bite. The steaming of that hay will increase the palatability and encourage them to eat a type of hay that they would normally not eat well.

Nutrition can be a very complicated topic, but the most important message regarding steaming hay is that the nutrient profile of the hay remains essentially the same and is a great way to feed your horse. Not only is the hay healthy nutritionally, but it can protect the airway from inflammation by reducing dust and killing allergenic mold spores as well.

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