

HOW DO TREATS FIT INTO MY HORSE'S DIET?

By Dr. Mikelle Roeder

While there is much controversy over the merits of feeding or not feeding treats from a training or behavioral standpoint, there is no doubt that many of us thoroughly enjoy the warm, fuzzy feeling we get from handing our horse a delicious treat. However, thanks to the constant barrage of sometimes confusing and conflicting nutritional information, many of us wonder if we are harming our horse nutritionally by occasionally indulging in treat-giving.



- Are treats inherently bad?
- Can overweight horses have treats?
- Should we look for heavily fortified treats?

Let's approach this from a practical, mathematical viewpoint. A single treat is not likely to weigh very much. For instance, the Dobbin's Delights Apple & Oat treats weigh not more than 10 grams each. The diminutive Dobbin's Delights Apple Hugs weigh less than 2 grams each. In comparison, a single peppermint, the quintessential racetrack treat, weighs about 5 grams. Now, let's look at the average intake of a 1000-lb horse. If the horse is of normal weight and lightly active, he needs about 2% of his body weight in food intake every day. That would be 20 lbs of feed. At 454 grams per lb, that is a total intake of 9080 grams of feed! A 10-gram treat for a horse would be akin to a human eating one M&M.

Let's now evaluate this from a calorie perspective. A 10-gram Dobbin's Delights Apple & Oat treat will have approximately 30 calories. A 1000-lb maintenance horse needs between 15,000 and 16,000 calories a day just to survive. Even an overweight horse is not likely to be negatively affected by the offering of one or two treats a day, and a concerned owner could always use Apple Hugs (at only 6 calories each) to reward a portly equine. So again, even feeding several treats a day is not likely to be an issue from a dietary standpoint.

What about actual nutrition? Many treats are fortified with various vitamins and minerals, but the reality is that unless a significant amount is fed or the treat is very heavily fortified, the contribution to the horse's daily nutrition is negligible. If you are relying on treats to balance your horse's diet, then you need to back up and evaluate your forage and concentrate sources and build a better nutritional foundation. On the flip side, a few treats are not going to unbalance the sound nutrition of a well-designed feeding program.

So if you enjoy giving treats, and your horse enjoys getting them, relax and go for it! Given the variety of sizes, forms and flavors, there is bound to be a Dobbin's Delights treat that is perfect for your situation!