



Canter For Climate



GRAZING FOR HEALTHY HORSES AND HEALTHY PASTURES

FACTSHEET SERIES

FACTSHEETS 1-5

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Introduction

We all dream of happy, healthy horses while also saving on feed costs.

Welcome to Canter for Climate's series of Factsheets. Delve into invaluable insights on horse and pasture management that will enrich your horses' lives and environment.

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HORSES AND PASTURES – AN INTRODUCTION

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Factsheet 2

PASTURE GROWTH AND RECOVERY

Factsheet 2 explains in more detail pasture grasses' growth patterns and how grazing influences the quality and quantity of grass grown.

Factsheet 3

GRAZING MANAGEMENT FOR HEALTHY PASTURES

Factsheet 3 describes the principles of pasture management, the interaction between pasture plants and soil biology and why taller grasses are good for the environment.

Factsheet 4

GRAZING MANAGEMENT FOR HEALTHY HORSES

Factsheet 4 provides information on how different pasture conditions affect your horses' health and offers suggestions on management to achieve the best pasture for your horse.

Factsheet 5

PROPERTY MANAGEMENT FOR HEALTHY HORSES

Factsheet 5 discusses principles of care for a healthy horse. It explains how paddock layout can help keep your horse happy mentally and physically.





Canter For Climate



HORSES AND PASTURES AN INTRODUCTION

FACTSHEET #1

FACTSHEET 1/5

HORSES AND PASTURES AN INTRODUCTION

If you own horses I am sure you would love them grazing on beautiful green pastures all year round. The problem is that many of us are required to keep our horses in small paddocks as most of us don't live on big acreage. These small paddocks often end up more bare ground and weeds than green grass.

*Changing the way we graze
the paddock can improve our
pastures and help the environment*

Healthy Pastures

When a horse paddock is continuously grazed our hard hooved friends cause soil compaction and the palatable/preferred species are grazed out leaving only the unpalatable plants and often bare ground. This then causes problems with dust or mud and erosion.

Bare and/or compacted soil does not effectively absorb rainfall, resulting in increased runoff, carrying away soil and nutrients, polluting waterways and adding to flooding. This reduced infiltration also results in less moisture in the soil with water stressed plants as it turns dry.

The leaves of a plant are their solar panels so the sun can power their photosynthesis to create their energy (carbohydrates) to create new plant material and stores.

Plants feed some of these carbohydrates to the soil biology in exchange for nutrients. This exchange process greatly increases the nutrients that are available to plants.



Healthy plants have big roots systems that interact better with soil biology giving the plant excellent access to water and nutrients.

See Factsheet 3 for further details.

Healthy plants lead to healthy soil
which leads to healthy plants!

To recover from grazing, plants need to use reserves stored in their stalks and roots while they re-grow leaves, so they can begin to photosynthesis again.

Overgrazed plants deplete their root systems, continually having to grow leaves from reserves. This reduced root system reduces access to water and nutrients and reduces feeding of the soil biology, even further limiting nutrient availability.

All these factors contribute to the downward cycle of less productive pastures.

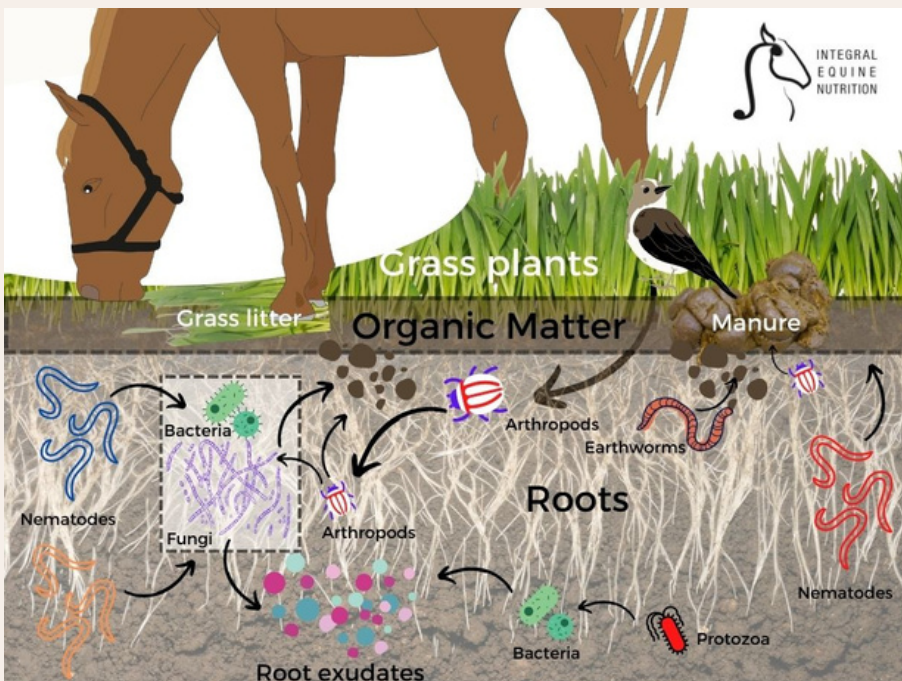


Image: Sophie Fletcher - Integral Equine Nutrition

Pasture condition affecting horse health

Horses prefer the “sweet” short grass but if this short grass is the majority of their diet this can lead to metabolic disorders. Also, in grass species that contain oxalates, the young short growth will have much higher levels of oxalates than older growth.

See Factsheet 4 for further details.



IMAGE: CSRIO

In large paddocks with abundant grass, horses will still overgraze the short grass and the species they like while leaving clumps of old rank grass. Horses also tend to choose certain areas where they rest, dig holes or walk up and down, resulting in the classic “horse-sick” pastures.

These poorly grassed paddocks that are often muddy lead to many foot issues with lame horses and hours of care. Bare, dusty paddocks can lead to eye and respiratory issues and sand colic. Unproductive pastures also increases your reliance on alternative feed sources, making it more expensive to own your horse.

How to graze

There are actions you can take to reduce the environmental impact of your horses, regardless of where your horse lives or the size of the paddock it grazes.

You can rotate your horses across your paddocks, moving horses on before the pasture is eaten down too low. And you can allow your pastures to recover before they are grazed again. If you mow/slash, do this as high as you can and not too frequently.

Very healthy pastures with extensive root systems can cope with occasional severe grazing but still need time to recover.

These actions will allow the plants to maintain reserves and a good root system that aids rapid recovery and quick re-growth.

See Factsheet 2 for why this is necessary.



Key Points

> Good grazing practice by horses can improve pasture composition, quality and persistence.

> Well managed pasture provides the cheapest feed, reduces vet bills and is good for the environment.

If the pasture has not recovered when you want to come back to that section, then your horses need to be confined on a portion of the property and fed hay. If you do not have access to a confinement yard with a hardened surface, you can fence off a corner of a paddock or a weedy patch, this leaves the rest of the property's pastures to re-grow, maintaining health and vigour.

If your horses are on agistment then you might be able to partner with two or three other agistees to rotate your horses around the paddocks.

See Factsheet 5 for further examples on how to restrict horse access to pastures.

Summary

Giving your horses constant access to all your pasture often leads to degraded paddocks that cause mud, dust and erosion and very poor grass growth.

Horses should not graze predominately on short sweet grass. Excessive sweet grass can lead to several metabolic conditions.



Following these suggestions will result in healthy pasture and healthy horses;

- Let pasture get longer >10cm (preferably 30cm for tussocky species) before being grazed.
- Generally graze to no more than 75% utilisation, leaving at least some stem to allow rapid recovery.
- When you mow or slash, do so as high as you can, at least >6cm preferably 15cm if you have tussock grasses like Rhodes and green panic.
- Let pasture recover before putting your horses back in.
- If the pasture has not recovered then lock your animal away and feed them hay.

Pastures managed this way produce better quality pasture for the horse and a better environment for everyone.

References

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www.equiculture.net

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CSIRO

www.csiro.au

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North QLD Dye Tropics NRM - Healthy Soils Project

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