



**Nidderdale**  
National  
Landscape

A guide to  
**Grassland Management**  
for Horse Health

Before using this resource, you may want to use our '[Guide to Understanding Grassland Types](#)' to better understand which type of grassland you currently own/manage.

With this knowledge you will be better equipped to create and a species-rich grassland suited to your area and aims.

This resource sheet has been developed in conjunction with Jane Wood of the Good Hay Guide.

## Natural diets

Horses evolved to survive on **nutritionally poor fibrous diets** made up of a diversity of plant species. They eat little and often and can chew for up to 18-hours a day.

The **yearly cycle** of losing weight in the winter and putting weight on in the summer is essential to the **balance of their metabolism**.



Figure 1. Ample grazing land allowing for the natural walk-graze-walk feeding pattern. A diversity of plants also provides the horses with a variety of minerals and other beneficial compounds. Credit: Olivier Guiberteau

Their digestive system requires constant use, which means that intake is slow and regular throughout the day. The horse's natural walk-graze-walk pattern plays an important part in the passage of fibre through the hind gut.

## How domestication has impacted horse health

Housing horses in small pastures or paddocks has significantly altered a horse's natural pattern by **reducing the area they have to graze**. A reduction in area leads to overgrazing of a paddock which reduces the availability of fibre through plant material, leads to the loss of mineral-rich plant species important to health and creates conditions that favour **high**

**parasite burdens**. All these factors can negatively impact a horse's health.

**Modern horse management often relies on routine worming** to control parasites. While effective in the short term, this has contributed to widespread anthelmintic (wormer) resistance, making parasite control increasingly difficult. Additionally, residues of worming chemicals in horse droppings can accumulate in the soil, **harming beneficial microbes** and disrupting natural soil biology.

Feed companies have developed equine concentrates or complete rations to supplement grass and hay. Although these processed feeds are effective at addressing energy deficiencies, they are far less effective at replacing natural dietary fibre or accurately meeting individual horse's complex and variable mineral requirements.

## Medical Costs

Certain feeding practices can negatively affect equine digestive health and increase veterinary costs.

**Many leisure horses have low energy requirements** yet are frequently kept on improved pastures that are high in non-structural carbohydrates (sugars) and low in effective fibre. This predisposes them to excess sugar intake while failing to meet their fundamental fibre needs. Supplementary feeding can further increase sugar and starch load without correcting fibre deficiencies.

Combined with infrequent feeding, these practices promote **excessive acid production** in the stomach and hindgut, compromise gut integrity, and **allow toxins to enter the bloodstream**.

These nutritional imbalances are strongly associated with costly and ongoing conditions such as:

- **Laminitis**
- **Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS)**
- **Insulin dysregulation**
- **Obesity**
- **Gastric ulcers**

Traditional equine feeding advice often emphasise weight gain and energy intake for performance, rather than fibre intake or long-term gut health. It is important to remember that this guidance was developed in a time when horses were worked harder and spent most of their day grazing on larger, less improved pastures. Under those conditions, energy-dense feeds helped support work requirements, and fibre and mineral needs were more easily met naturally, so digestive problems were less common than they are today.



Figure 2. Horses being fed appropriate hay and provided with sufficient grazing land have a better temperament. Credit Paul Skirrow

## Good horse pasture management

Restoring horse pastures from overgrazed, species-poor grasslands to something more diverse can be a major step towards **regaining healthy grazing for our horses**.

Below are several management techniques that you can employ to manage your pasture better for your horse's health and temperament.

- **Rotate grazing frequently** - Split your paddock into several areas or strips, moving your horse from one area to another every few days. This will allow some areas to rest, helping plants establish a strong and resilient root system.
- **Allow vegetation to grow** – Always grazing vegetation in a paddock short negatively impacts its ability to regrow. Allowing vegetation to grow longer strengthens root systems and encourages regrowth due to the increased photosynthetic capabilities of larger leaves. This means your paddock can actually produce more vegetation per a given area.
- **Never graze too short** - When a horse is grazing short vegetation their mouth comes into contact with the soil, increasing the risk of consuming parasites. Having horses graze higher up the plant stem reduces parasite burdens as many parasites live in the soil.
- **Plant hedgerows and trees** - This will provide natural shade during the hotter months and browsing opportunities.

- **Avoid fertilisers and herbicides** - High levels of soil nutrients increase capabilities of aggressive grasses to dominate, reducing overall plant diversity. Also, plants will have a higher nutrient content that can be damaging for horse health.
- **Reconsider how many horses the land can support** – Having too many horses on your land can cause overgrazing which will damage the vegetation root systems and increase the risk of parasite burdens

## Healthy horse hay

Another major step towards better equine health is **feeding the right kind of hay**. Hay produced from **species-rich late cut meadows** has a **high fibre content** and **low sugar**. These are proven factors for better health outcomes in horses. Recent studies also indicate that there may be advantages to the **mix of plant compounds** found in a diverse meadow which allow some level of metabolic balancing and sugar regulation.

**Why do traditionally managed meadows produce hay that has less sugar, high fibre content and full of beneficial compounds?** Traditionally managed meadows are usually **cut from mid-July**, which is late in the season compared with silage meadows that can be mown several times a year starting as early as May. As the vegetation is left to stand longer before mowing, some of the **nutrient content within the leaves is reabsorbed back into the roots**, meaning less sugar and therefore excess calories are available to be eaten in the leaves by horses. They also have on average a **higher diversity of plants** within the sward compared with agriculturally improved meadows, each of which with its own set of unique beneficial compounds. Think of a salad consisting of a variety of leaves and vegetables, this will provide a greater diversity of beneficial compounds



Figure 3. Traditionally managed meadows where vegetation is left to grow late into the year before being cut. Mown vegetation is dried for several days before being baled in breathable nets. Unlike silage, hay does not ferment and contains fewer sugars and calories. Credit Paul Harris

## Needing hay?

If you would like to try feeding your horse species-rich late cut hay but don't know where to purchase it from, get in touch with Jane Wood of the Good Hay Guide. Jane specialises in sourcing horse suitable hay from farms that support and enhance biodiversity in their grasslands.

**Email** – [info@goodhayguide.org](mailto:info@goodhayguide.org)

**Mobile** – 07821 495447

## Additional resources for you

Malvern Hills National Landscape – [Creating and Managing Wildflower Meadows with Horses and Ponies](#)

## Funding

To help fund grassland management, try and take advantage of agri-environment schemes. These can help fund restoration works and ongoing management. Below are two funding schemes which you may be eligible for.

### Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI):

[Sustainable Farming Incentive: guidance for applicants and agreement holders](#) – this is currently unavailable and will become available in April 2026.

### Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT):

[Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier](#)



## Contact Us

If there is something you'd like to get in touch with us about managing your grasslands, please contact us using one of the methods below.

Our postal address is:

The Old Workhouse  
King Street  
Pateley Bridge  
Harrogate  
HG3 5LE

Our phone number and email address are:

T: 01423 712950

E: [Nidderdalegrasslands@northyorks.gov.uk](mailto:Nidderdalegrasslands@northyorks.gov.uk)

