

Barn Folklore: The Bran Mash

The popular mash may be questionable addition to your horse's diet.

By: Robert Fera, Deerpath Breeding and Development

Many feeding regimes in barns today are still based on traditional methods and old time myths. The bran mash is no exception as there are as many opinions on why one should feed a mash that could fill a whole book. Whatever the reason for feeding a mash, most people believe they are doing their equine friends a favour, but are you really? NO

Changes to a feeding program of a horse that are sudden are never kind to their digestive system; and a bran mash whether it is once a week, a month or in a stressful situation is a sudden impact on the system and may cause digestive upset as well as cause a calcium and phosphorous imbalance.

Bran contains 10% fibre and 16% protein, and its protein is incomplete as it is lacking in essential amino acids that horses require. Most people feed bran to increase the fibre in their horses diet but bran as stated above doesn't have as much as the high fibre rations that are on the market today.

Bran also has a calcium to phosphorous ratio of 1:10 while a horse requires a ratio of 2:1. This imbalance can lead to developmental problems with young growing horses as well as mares that are in foal.

Bran will not fatten a horse nor is it a laxative. In terms of calories, corn and oats and most complete pelleted rations on today's market contain more energy, and since bran has incomplete proteins it is not suitable for growing horses.

Most people will think bran is a laxative after they see their horse the next day with loose stool or more stool than before, in all reality the sudden switch in diet has caused the digestive system to become upset. So a bran mash could possibly put more stress on a horse's system that is already stressed by illness or exhaustion.

The myth that a warm bran mash can warm a horse in cold weather is false. The warmth they get from the mash would last a few minutes if at all. The most efficient way to keep a horse warm in cold weather is to adjust its ration so that it is getting more high quality hay and less grain. Hay fuels the furnace, the horse produces heat when they are digesting hay, and the digestive process for hay will produce a longer lasting heat than a bran mash.

Bran is in no means a bad thing; it tastes good and can be safely fed to horses if fed everyday instead of shocking their systems once a week or month. A handful of bran everyday is all that is needed if you wish to add some fibre to their diet, but if fibre is what you want there are better and nutritionally complete fibre substitutes on the market. If you do feed some bran daily then you should feed high quality alfalfa hay or a supplement to help balance out the calcium to phosphorous ratio. Feeding bran to developing horses is in my opinion not a chance I would take because of the possibilities

of development problems that are associated with the imbalance of calcium and phosphorous. This is one factor that can be controlled so why risk your young horse.

Most of us want to do our best for our equine friends, but we must ask ourselves what we want to accomplish with them and then determine the right feeding program that optimizes the use of nutrients and helps their body's repair, grow and utilize energy. There are a lot of complete fibre alternatives to bran on the market today that have more fibre and complete proteins along with vitamin and minerals and are made for all types of horses with different needs. Thinking that your doing your horse a favour or giving it a treat is a large misconception based on old folklore when in fact by feeding this bran mash once a week or a month you are causing digestive upset. With advancements in nutrition and more complete feeds on the market there are better way to get fibre into your horse; if you want to give your horse a treat give it a carrot or an apple both taste great and your horse will thank you for it.