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Horse Nibbles

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Are Stabled Horses at Increased Risk for Developing Colic?

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Housing horses in pastures rather than stalls may reduce the likelihood of a horse developing colic. According to the results of a recent study performed by a group of British researchers, there is a decrease in stall-kept horses' intestinal motility (or movement of digesta) as compared to pasture-kept horses, which could help explain the higher risk of colic seen with stabled animals.

Sarah Freeman, associate professor of Veterinary Surgery at the University of Nottingham School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, in Leicestershire, used ultrasonography to assess the frequency of large intestinal contractions (and thus, the amount of intestinal motility) in two groups of eight horses (no recent history of gastrointestinal disease).

The first group was stabled throughout the study period, which was comprised of two monitoring phases. They were fed hay and concentrate twice daily and had constant access to fresh water. Horses in this group were exercised lightly for 60-90 minutes daily. These horses remained in the same routine throughout both monitoring phases.

The second group was kept on pasture 24 hours a day with constant access to fresh water for the first part of the monitoring phase. They received no formal exercise or supplemental concentrates while at pasture. For the second monitoring phase, horses in this group were transferred to the stabled regime, identical to the first group. They were given a two-week acclimatization period between being turned out and stall kept.

Study results showed a measurable difference in large intestinal motility between the two groups of horses.

"The frequency of contractions of all intestinal regions collectively was significantly lower when horses were stabled compared to the pasture regime, but this effect was greatest in a region of the colon where impactions commonly occur," Freeman said in the study.

The team noted that there are several factors that differ between stable and pasture management, including feed type, feeding intervals, and activity levels.

Fall Pasture Evaluation

Fall is a good time of year to walk your pastures and evaluate what management is needed to get ready for the next grazing season.

Areas to consider:

Weeds – Fall is a good time to apply pesticides on hard to kill annual weeds like dandelions, curly dock, milkweed, dogbane, and Canada thistle. A fall application of Round-up® will be translocated through the interconnected root system of these annual weeds as sugars are stored for the winter. More weeds will be killed and less competition will be around in the spring. If you prefer to not use an herbicide in your pasture, clipping weeds in early in the fall, while they are actively storing sugars will help limit some spring weeds due to decreased energy storage in the roots.

Soil Sampling and Lime – Lime should be applied to pastures in the fall, because in situations where lime is not incorporated at application it can take up to 2 years to get the full effect. However, fall application will allow for some lime to be incorporated with the soil during the freeze thaw cycles of the fall, winter and spring. The best way to determine how much lime may be needed in a pasture is to take a soil sample. If the pasture is not going to be tilled, samples can be taken to a depth of 4 to 6 inches. Approximately 1 sample per acre or a minimum of 15 samples per pasture should be taken, mixed together and sub-sampled to be sent for analysis.

Soil Sample results can also be used to determine needs for nutrients like phosphorus and potassium that can also be fall applied to fuel the pasture for the spring.

Seeding Needs – Spring frost seeding is a great way to overseed a whole pasture where tillage is not planned. Again, the freeze thaw cycle helps to incorporate the seed in the spring. Frost seeding is done typically in March, but needs to be timed to when the soil warms during the day and freezes again at night with the frost. Red clover has been shown to be the most effective species to use in frost seeding. It can be mixed with a grass when seeded. If you are thinking of doing a frost seeding it is important to do weed control this fall and clip the pasture short or graze late to limit competition and ensure that seed hits the ground and is able to have soil contact.

While walking your pastures this fall you may find places that need new seeding more than others. These may be areas of the pasture that have special needs, heavier soils, too much water, not enough water, or areas of animal concentration. These areas should be evaluated for their specific needs and have species selected to meet these needs. In wet areas with heavier soils seeding with reedcanary grass will give better growth and coverage. In high traffic areas seeding with a tall fescue will do best because of it's tough, deep root system and vigorous growth under poor soil conditions, be sure to choose an endophyte-free variety.

If reseeding is done the sensitive areas should be fenced off to allow good growth in the spring before grazing. Areas that are seeded should not be grazed until there are 5 to 6 inches of growth and a sturdy root system. Checking the root system is simple, go out and see how easily or if you can pull out the grass.

Manure Application – Again when there is no planned tillage for a pasture fall application of composted manure to pastures will allow for nutrients to be incorporated with the soil during freeze thaw cycles and for nitrogen sources to breakdown for spring availability. Fall application will also ensure that any bacteria or other pests still in the manure will be killed in the freezing winter temperatures.

Other Considerations – Brush removal, bee control, and fence repair should also be considered in the fall. Removing brush in the fall will keep animals from eating it when there is little grass for grazing. If there are bee's nests in the pasture removal or spraying in the fall is a safe time due to reduced activity in the cooler temperatures. Finally, making sure that fences are in good condition is important especially if the pastures will be used in the winter. As plants die for the winter areas of fence that were not accessible in the spring and summer will be and could lead to injury or escape.

Contact Bourdeaus' and Bushey, Inc and talk to a Certified Crop Adviser for help with pasture evaluation and improvement.