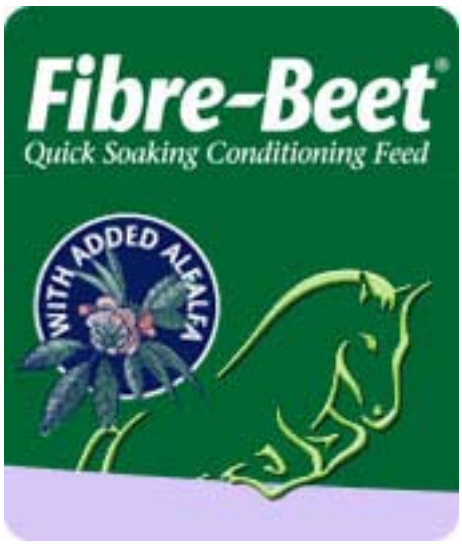
Benefits of a Liquid Diet



Wet Feeding? Does it matter?

Increasingly the nutrition of the horse is becoming more widely understood and accepted, and the benefits of maximising fibre intake has been well received. Companies are producing high fibre mixes to help optimise the utilisation of forage and there is now a comprehensive range of possibilities to maintain the nutrition, behaviour (chewing, trickle feeding) and welfare of the horse.

So why do we need to look at a new concept? What is different in wet feeding? Your horse has access to water so why do you need to add another layer of complication.

Well, answer me this. How much does your horse drink? The answer may surprise you.

A horse, at rest, may drink up to 7 litres per 100 kg of body weight per day. A 400 kg horse will drink over three bucketfuls. During exercise up to 15 l of water per hour can be lost as sweat – another two buckets. And it has been shown that as water intake is restricted so intake of feed reduces.

Water is essential, not only to maintain every aspect of the physiology and biochemistry of the body but also to ensure the correct conditions in the gut.

The gut contents (chyme) in a horse, is made up mainly of water in which is suspended food particles and digestive enzymes. Muscular contractions squeeze (and mix) the contents along the length of the gut as the enzymes break down nutrients for absorption and microbes mix with, and attach to, the fibre to release energy. It's only as the chyme passes through the large intestine that most of the water is absorbed and utilised in the biochemistry of the animal.

So, no problem; you have a bucket of water in the stable and you fill it whenever it's water level is low; or maybe you've an automatic bowl. However trial work has shown that water intake from bowls is less than buckets, and if intake from buckets is restricted feed intake and welfare can be compromised.

And water intake is essential. A big drink after a meal is good, isn't it? Yes, but water and feed intake together is better.

Every article of feeding horses relates feeding behaviour to the evolutionary past of the horse. They are trickle feeders, far ranging, eating a variety of forages and exercising intermittently (when hunted, or mating). And this article is no different.

Forage varies in its moisture content. However even mature grass contains up to 70% moisture and so a grazing horse can fulfil most of its water needs from grass. Chewing a moist product has less impact on the teeth and localised oral dehydration and "prepares" it for its subsequent journey through the gut, where it will mix easier with additional water than a dry chewed product. It's like the difference between eating porridge and the dry oat flakes!

And that's the nub of the problem. Most feeds where water soaks in well are starchy and current thinking encourages a reduction in these feeds unless the horse's level of activity justifies their use. Fibrous feeds (hay, alfalfa) do not soak well, and soaking will result in a slightly damp product and a bucket of water! Wet feeding of the horse is better as it avoids physiological stress in chewing, swallowing and gut transit. However, for many people access to grazing may not be practical.

Fibre-Beet, a new product from the Speedi-Beet stable, addresses this situation. Exploiting the technology of Speedi-Beet's rapid soaking, Fibre-Beet absorbs at least 3 times its own weight of water, holding the moisture through chewing and swallowing and entering the stomach in an ideal form. Used as a top dressing it will enable dry forage to be moistened with chewing. By maximising water intake during eating a separate "top-up" from a bucket is more likely to meet the horse's physiological needs. As a separate meal it supplies and ideal profile of fibre, as well as supplementary moisture.

Fibre-Beet complements the water holding and nutritional benefits of Speedi-Beet with those of a moist alfalfa, a combination that is physiological winner in the concept of wet feeding of horses.

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