

# Spanish Barb Nutrition Considerations



By Kathleen Bellemare

Our horses have survived for many generations in the desert southwest on very limited (but likely diverse) forage quantity and quality. We, as loving horse owners, want to shower our horses with the best nutrition we can give them, but in the case of barbs, I would like to recommend caution that what the horse industry considers good nutrition (developed on the concept of getting horses to competitive events by the age of 2), doesn't always apply to our thrifty Spanish Barbs. Consider the long distances under heavy loads that the Spanish explorers travelled. There is not much chance that they travelled with molasses covered grains or that they were able to allow free choice forage on a daily basis as they traversed Mexico and the desert southwest.

With regard to disclaimers, I have now had one or more Spanish Barbs in my barn for nearly 24 years, and other horses before, after, and with them. I continue to learn and evolve in what I have found to be effective ways to feed my little herd, and may alter my recommendations in the future. I would like to share some things that I have learned about feeding my barbs, who have all lived on fairly small acreage with some pasture time available. Not every barb is the same, nor do they come to us in the same condition, so obviously, any recommendation that I have are based on the 8 different barbs that I have personally cared for. Many of these horses were not related, so I am drawing my recommendations from my limited pool of experience. Being a rather nerdy person, I have learned to use science to develop my barb feeding program and I'd like to share what I have learned with you.

My barbs seem to be able to maintain themselves on a fairly low percentage of body weight of high-quality grass hay, as compared to what I have seen recommended for horses in general. On average, with other supplementation that will be discussed below, our barbs eat about 1% of their body weight in hay per day. I have had other breeds in my barn that could eat 3% of their body weight in forage and still be thin. Also, it will take any horse a few months to come into a state of balanced nutrition when you bring them into your barn, so keeping a watchful, objective eye on them is really important.

When I say high quality grass hay, here's where some of that scientific approach comes in, I can usually find a protein content of 12 – 16% in western grown grass hay. Protein is not your enemy in feeding your barb! It supplies digestible energy and the ability to build and maintain muscle. I am partial to Drover Fescue (which, incidentally is safe for pregnant mares – endophytes in fescue are more of an issue in the eastern US where there is a much higher level of moisture in the production of hay). I also like that Drover (and it's cousins, Dovey and Brutus fescue) has a fairly broad blade as compared to Bermuda which can be very thin and lend itself to causing colic under some conditions. My horses have found it very palatable through the years, they like it much more than orchard grass, brome, or timothy. The most important thing I look for in any hay (grass or alfalfa) is that it needs a fairly low carbohydrate (sugar plus starch) content. I do not buy any hay that does not have a hay analysis done, and work with my local suppliers to test at least 15 bales and review the results before I put the hay in my barn. There is no way to know what is in your hay if it is not tested and you may be not only wasting your money but also your horse's good health. Just because it looks or smells good or by knowing the variety or even if you bought from the same grower last year and your horse did great on it! Weather, irrigation and soil conditions are constantly changing, so my first rule about hay is never assume anything! A hay analysis costs about \$35 and, if you buy your hay once or even just a few times per year, it really makes sense to know exactly what you are feeding and what might need to be supplemented. Also, hay grown in extreme drought conditions can have high levels of sugar and starch, or toxic levels of selenium and nitrates.

INSERT A HAY ANALYSIS HERE AND TALK ABOUT WHAT WE CAN LOOK FOR AND LEARN

don't effectively process high levels of sugar and starch. They end up producing more insulin than their muscles can absorb and are categorized as insulin resistant. This is a metabolic disorder that can reduce both the quality and length of your horse's life.

Cresty necks are the first sign. Don't love your horse to death, a lean (but not skinny) barb that is well exercised is your best defense. NO APPLES, CARROTS OR FEED WITH ANY MOLASSES

IN IT!

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Horses do not generally develop insulin resistance until about age 12-15. So, just because a young horse has never had a problem, doesn't mean you're in the clear for the life of the animal. '

Early warning sign - October colic. If your horse has had several fall colics, even over a period of years, it could be telling you that it is becoming insulin resistant. Horses metabolisms change with the reduction in light, and a metabolic syndrome horse will have a harder time with the change

Don't give up if your horse has symptoms of laminitis! It is not something they can get over with medication or in a short amount of time. This is a situation that has built up over time, and will take much time on a balanced diet to correct.

Learn about your hay! Local NM hays that I have purchased have ranged in sugar and starch content from 7% to 26%. I had used the same grower of orchard grass for years and thought my horses to be very healthy, then in a drought year, 2 of my horses became laminitic. When I had the hay tested it was 26% sugar and starch. An insulin resistant horse's diet should be less than 12% sugar and starch.

You can't tell hay content by looking, smelling or even the type of hay it is. Weather conditions in different years, and the time of cutting and baling can dramatically affect sugar and starch content. Test your hay before you buy it, or have your grower test it. Buy it in large enough lots to last you 6 months to the whole year. Testing a hay sample costs \$26.00 to get the full analysis done from If this is "too much" I'd be happy to help, or contact an equine nutritionist, I know a great one who has taught me much, but it's a process and I'm still learning!

Don't beat yourself up if your horse is having problems. My favorite saying with horses is. "ya don't know what ya don't know until you know it!"