

To Treat Or Not To Treat?



By LISA SLADE

Any pet owner knows the horror of dropping a piece of food on the floor, watching your dog scarf it in the second before you can react, and then heading straight for Google (before you can react, and then heading straight for Google (before you possibly poison control) to type, "Can dogs eat _____?" The list of foods that harm dogs is long, and every small animal veterinarian can tell a story of a dog who consumed a few grapes or just a little dark chocolate and needed serious medical intervention.

But for horses, it's not quite the same. Few owners keep a pamphlet of items their horses can't eat on their barn refrigerator, and an emergency veterinary call for a similar situation as the one above isn't common. In the Chronicle's popular online Behind The Stall Door feature, we learn some horses—generally

considered herbivores—enjoy chicken nuggets or an occasional cheeseburger; some eat a donut or Pop-Tart alongside their owner for breakfast; others consume veterinarian-prescribed Guinness or even whiskey. All seem happy and healthy.

Horses aren't as susceptible to accidental poisoning for a few reasons: Their larger body mass means it takes more of some food items to cause an issue (though truly toxic substances can harm in even minuscule amounts). They don't live in our homes, with access to our chocolate bars, trail mixes, cleaning products and pharmaceuticals. We don't eat most meals right in front of them while they beg for a small bite of whatever we're consuming, and a horse, generally speaking, won't sample as many things under his nose as the average dog.

Common equine treats include carrots and apples, and experts say those are fine as long as given in moderation to horses without insulin resistance.
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HORSE CARE ISSUE



You shouldn't feed your horse anything and everything, however, or assume all items are safe.

"I wouldn't recommend feeding your horse a chocolate bar. I think sticking to a diet that they are used to eating is always a good idea," said Janet Greenfield-Davis, BVMS, MRCVS, CVA, CERPM, of Palm Beach Equine in Wellington, Florida. "Horses are meant to eat grass and hay; they're meant to graze all day long."

You can still give them treats—just with some caution and awareness, and, as with most things in life, in moderation.

Most food items can be broken into one of a few categories.

1. NEVER UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES

Some plants are toxic to horses, and those should obviously not be given as treats. That list includes red maple leaves, oak leaves and acorns, foxgloves, nightshades, yew, bracken ferns, rhododendrons, privet and ragwort, among others.

Of course, no normal horse owner is likely to feed any of those intentionally, but some are common in parts of the world, so it's important to check your horse's pastures for them—though many aren't palatable, and horses will skip them if they have other choices—and make sure your hay source doesn't include them.

Any food that poses a choking hazard, including pitted fruits like mangos, peaches and cherries, shouldn't be fed whole.

That's a circumstance that can happen by accident—for instance, if your horse has one of those fruit trees in his field—but even some fruits without pits can cause issues if they're not in horse-sized bites.

"We have seen incidents of choke because of horses eating mangos and tangerines," said Greenfield-Davis. "One horse did have a tangerine or an orange and did not chew it appropriately; we did have that. Pits should be removed."

2. BEST TO AVOID

A wide range of foods are technically toxic for horses, and though they're unlikely to cause severe illness in small doses, avoiding them is still the best tactic.

Avocados are one of those—dangerous because of the toxin persin (and that includes the plant's leaves in addition to its fruit)—as well as plants from the nightshade family (including potatoes and tomatoes) and onions. Potatoes are considered toxic to horses, but a few chips or French fries on occasion are unlikely to cause a severe issue. Just be careful not to overdo it, and never feed horses raw potatoes.

Garlic is sometimes fed as a supplement, and though it's marketed to help with bugs, Tania Cubitt, Ph.D., a nutritionist at Performance Horse Nutrition, doesn't recommend that. "What I've read is there's no safe amount determined, and one study showed large quantities can cause anemia," she said.

Rhubarb leaves and stems can harm a horse's kidneys, and persimmon fruits are also not recommended as their fibers can cause bezoars—concentrations of undigestible material in the digestive tract—which lead to colic or abdominal discomfort.

Some riders will let their horse have a bite of a cheeseburger, egg sandwich or chicken nugget, and while most people won't note adverse effects from feeding very small quantities of those items, Greenfield-Davis asks, "Why?"

"I think it would be a poor choice to feed an occasional burger or chicken nugget. Stay away from McDonald's," she said with a laugh. "I also don't recommend donuts. That would be my recommendation: not to feed your horse donuts."

3. BEWARE IF UNDER FEI PROTOCOLS

If your horse is regularly tested for Fédération Equestre Internationale competitions, you want to be extra careful with his treats—and with anything that goes in his mouth or is in his environment too. The FEI website recommends you purchase feed that's undergone Naturally Occurring Prohibited Substances testing to avoid items with "commonly known contaminants such as caffeine, theobromine, theophylline, morphine, hyoscine, hordenine and atropine."

Those substances lurk in trace quantities in some surprising items, including chocolate (caffeine, theophylline and theobromine) and poppy seeds (morphine). In addition you should beware items with paprika (can include capsaicin), any hot pepper or chili seasoning, and lavender (even lavender shampoos).

Basically, if your horse is regularly tested for FEI competitions, any item you feed them outside of their regular hay and grain, including supplements, creates a potential risk for contamination and a positive drug test. Both the U.S. Equestrian Federation and FEI websites offer searchable databases.

"When in doubt, don't feed it," said Cubitt.

4. FINE IN MODERATION

Does your horse enjoy a morning Pop-Tart or donut? While it's unlikely to harm him if he's in good health and weight, especially if only given occasionally, you might consider a different treat anyway. If he suffers from insulin resistance, that's doubly true—and for those horses you should limit treating of any kind.

"Anything with too much sugar in it is always a bad thing," said Greenfield-Davis. "We always say even a carrot is like a candy bar with insulin-resistant horses. I think being aware of what you're feeding and how much sugar is in it would be the No. 1 issue to watch out for."

"When in doubt, don't feed it."

—DR. TANIA CUBITT

Even those items that nearly all horse owners offer as treats—like sugar cubes, carrots and apples—can cause issues if overfed.

"Giving over five pounds of carrots a day is harmful," said Cubitt. "We had a lady call us, and she said, 'Something is wrong with my horse; he has funny colored urine.' It was orange-colored, and we're wondering, 'Is it tying up?' It turns

out she had rescued it and felt really bad for him, and she was treating him all the time. We said, 'Tell us everything you feed the horse.' She said, 'I give it treats. I give carrots as a treat.' Well, she gave it like 10 pounds of carrots a day. If you give too many, you're likely to get laminitis because there's so much sugar."

Sweet potatoes are safer to feed than their regular potato counterparts, and their only risk is thanks to their sugar and starch content. Other safe treats include bananas, watermelon (including rinds), lettuce, cucumbers, snow peas, green beans, strawberries, celery, cantaloupe, grapes (they are not like dogs in this way), and pumpkin. But again—you can probably guess what we're about to say—moderation is key, and make sure the items are cut into appropriately horse-sized pieces to prevent choke.

While logic might indicate you shouldn't offer your horse alcohol, if he suffers from anhidrosis, beer might help, and it's unlikely to cause him any problems as long as—one more time—given in moderation. 🍷

SO YOUR HORSE ATE SOMETHING HE SHOULDN'T HAVE

Pet poison control hotlines aren't just for small animals. If your horse eats something toxic or just unusual, you should call your regular veterinarian, but the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Hotline and Pet Poison Helpline are also available for answering questions. Both charge a consultation fee, but they are equipped to answer questions about horses.

Pet Poison Helpline

PetPoisonHelpline.com
(855) 764-7661

ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center

aspca.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control
(888) 426-4435