

Balancing Your Horse from the Inside Out

by Jessica Lynn

Most of today's performance and competition horses are, for the most part, bred along specific dam and sire lines for the sports they compete in, in order to theoretically have "the edge" in competition, be it barrels, reining, cutting, endurance, dressage or racing. Couple that with years of conditioning and hard work, and one hopes to have a winner. However, when it comes to getting an edge on the competition, the key is the health of your horse, which ultimately is derived from a healthy digestive tract. To achieve digestive health, your equine athlete needs you to provide him with the highest potency pre- & pro-biotics, along with digestive enzymes. This combination promotes and maintains microbial balance within the intestine and absorption of all nutrients, as well as giving your horse the needed energy derived from his feed stuff, helping him be the best that he can be.

Most of the feeds on the market today are moving in the direction of "natural" – no sugar, no molasses, and no GMO corn or soy – trying to respond to the needs of the today's equines. Owners and trainers over the years have added oils, thinking they will give their horse energy, when energy really comes from having a healthy, functioning digestive tract that is balanced in its microbial populations so that it can absorb and utilize all of the energy provided in hay and other feedstuffs (which, for example, may be rich in the Omegas).

It's no secret that probiotics are good for your horse's gut, but did you know they are also loaded with other benefits, too? These include supporting the immune system, reducing inflammation, preventing diarrhea, and helping to prevent gas, gas colic and maybe even helping to prevent some types of impaction colic.

Another far too common source of digestive disturbance can be starch and/or sugar overload, which can come from grazing on rich spring grass, eating a diet too high in sugars (including grains), or adding oil from GMO crops to bucket feed. All of these things can disrupt beneficial microbials, causing partial die-off of good gut bacteria, which raises acidity in the gut and alters the natural pH balance. The result is massive destruction of the normal micro-flora, which can inhibit the absorption of vitamins and other nutrients essential to not only to good health, but to be in top form for competition, as well.

Unfortunately, the microflora/microbial balance in a horse's gut can be upset much faster than it can be restored. Beneficial intestinal bacteria can be depleted or destroyed and the pH of their environment severely altered by many situations, although the effects may not show up immediately. Your horse may just seem a bit off with no explanation, and you may think nothing has changed, but your horse is not able to digest his feed and convert it to the energy he needs to compete.

Let's look at your horse from the inside: When a horse starts grinding food with his teeth, his mouth releases enzymes, and thus begins that mouthful's approximately 75 to 100 foot journey through the digestive tract. The food mixes with digestive juices as it enters the

Photo: ©The Horse's Hoof



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stomach, where digestive enzymes and billions of microbials begin their work. Although a horse's stomach is relatively small compared to his size, it is tasked with initiating the breakdown of nutrients using digestive enzymes and stomach acids; very little absorption takes place here. Soluble carbohydrates, along with minerals, fats and proteins, are absorbed in the small intestine. Insoluble carbohydrates that are not so easily digested, as well as any undigested soluble carbohydrates, then pass to the cecum, or the "fermentative vat" before moving into the large intestine. A variety of live microbials that live in the cecum break down the remaining nutrients into viable, usable forms – among these are absorbable volatile fatty acids, which the horse uses for energy and nutrients.

What is "MICROBIAL DIGESTION?"

Microbial digestion is the breakdown of organic material such as hay and grass, and especially concentrated bag feedstuffs, by microbial organisms. It is the basic function of the horse's large intestine, and can be seriously damaged by prolonged or heavy dosing with antibiotics or sulfonamides and other drugs. The population of beneficial live microorganisms in the cecum remains relatively "stable" under normal conditions. As long as a horse is never stressed, never needs to be chemically wormed, is never vaccinated, never has a change in feed, and never needs antibiotics, then the balance should remain unaltered. However, as we all know, horses do experience stressful events, may need antibiotics or worming on occasion, and do have feed changes with the seasons and each load of hay.

Without a strong army of beneficial intestinal bacteria, food moving through the digestive tract is not "fermented" properly, and some remains undigested. When it hits the gastrointestinal tract, this undigested food may lead to colic, bloat, impactions or laminitis, and increase the possibility of developing food-related allergic condi-

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tions. A combination of select bacteria (microbials/probiotics), at approximately 10-20 billion or more CFUs (colony forming units) per serving/scoop, along with digestive enzymes and yeast, will help support and maintain a healthy digestive tract in your equine athlete, giving them more stamina and energy. If your horse is heavily competing or training, then the higher dose would be recommended.

SELECTING A PROBIOTIC BLEND

Combining probiotics and yeast cultures with digestive enzymes is an art, and if you can find a product that also includes natural vitamins C, E and D, minerals including zinc and copper, colostrum and extracted beta glucan from mushrooms, then you have found an excellent product.

In her "Nutrition as Therapy" course, Dr. Eleanor Kellon quotes Dr. Scott Weese, DVM, the closest thing there is to an expert on veterinary probiotics and equine GI tract diseases, "...at minimum, a microbial feed additive needs between 10 and 20 billion live CFUs per serving size, minimum, to have any effect in a horse." Dr. Juliet Getty, PhD in Equine Nutrition concurs that the guaranteed CFUs have to be in the billions not the millions. Dr. Joyce Harman of Harmany Equine Clinic from Virginia has been an advocate of probiotics for horses for a long while, and she is now also advocating mushroom beta glucan as an immune modulator per her recent article "10 Herbs for Your Horse" in which she states, "Exciting

research with immune system & cancer treatment support has been done with this mushroom or its extracts. The beta D-glucans appear to stimulate immunity for a broad spectrum of conditions. Extracts of the D fraction can be obtained in glycerin, which is palatable to many species."

There are only a couple products on the market that contain the pre-biotics, pro-biotics, beta glucans, and added natural vitamins and minerals; they have been on the market for more than 15 years. Do your research, read your labels, or give me a call, or email me. These companies have the health of your horse in mind! 🐾

***About the author:** Jessica Lynn regularly contributes articles for various national and international horse publications. She is the owner of Earth Song Ranch, is an Equine Nutritionist, a feed & supplement manufacturer based in Southern California (her products include EquineZyme and Equine Zyme Plus) and she is a distributor for Smooth Run Equine and Horse Tech Products. Jessica has been involved in alternative health care, herbs, homeopathy, alternative health and nutrition for almost 40 years, as well as bare foot hoof care for over 10 years. Contact Jessica via e-mail at Jessica@earthsongranch.com or phone 951-514-9700. Visit her informative web site at www.earthsongranch.com - where there are numerous published articles on equine digestive health. Her web site will also take you to Smooth Run Equine where you can learn more about equine digestive health.*

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