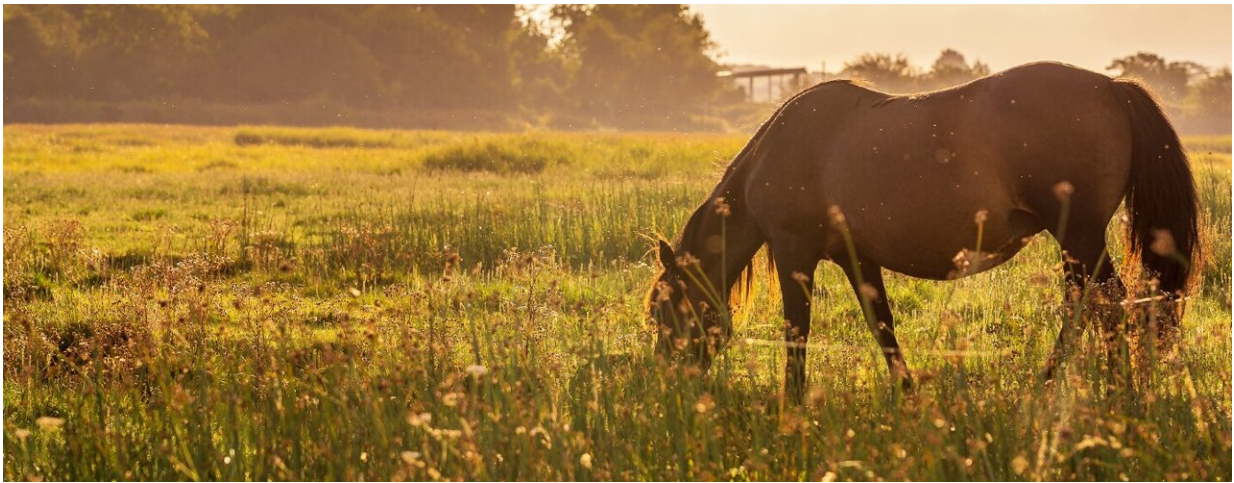


Equine feeding methods: Study examines effects on health, well-being

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Morris Animal Foundation-funded researchers studied how changing a horse's access to food affects their natural behavior and leads to health problems. Credit: Nick Fewings

A new study sheds light on how to better care for horses by evaluating the effects different feeding methods have on equine health and well-being, with the results published in the [*Journal of Equine Veterinary Science*](#).

Feral and [wild horses](#) can spend about 16 hours per day grazing. Changing their access to food can affect their natural behavior and lead to [health problems](#). To understand these changes better, researchers

looked at several feeding methods, including free-choice feeding, unlimited food access, slow-feeder (which also allows unlimited hay access but requires the horse to pull hay through a net), and an automatic box feeder.

"Taking care of horses means more than just giving them a place to stay, food and water," said Jéssica Carvalho Seabra, a researcher involved in this study. "It means giving them an environment where they can do things that are part of their [natural behavior](#), like grazing."

Researchers found that horses using automatic boxes and slow feeders consumed less and exhibited slower weight gain. Both methods effectively regulated [food intake](#). Horses with the freedom to choose when to eat had the highest hay utilization and [weight gain](#) rates, suggesting that this approach might not be optimal for overweight horses.

Horses with access to free choice feeding or a slow feeder spent more than half their day doing natural activities such as foraging. Conversely, horses using the box feeder spent only about a quarter of their day eating, and this treatment increased the time that horses spent standing, sniffing the ground and ingesting their own feces. Furthermore, horses using the box feeder displayed more signs of aggression.

During the study, the researchers noticed that horses became more aggressive as the feeders' size became smaller and access to the food became more difficult. To mitigate this, researchers suggest that if horses are given a limited amount of food, it's important to ensure enough space for each of them to eat without feeling crowded.

"Selecting the right feeding technique can extend the time [horses](#) engage in natural behaviors, reducing the incidence of chronic stress and potentially curbing the emergence of abnormal and stereotypic behaviors

in the long run," Carvalho Seabra said.

More information: Jéssica Carvalho Seabra et al, Effects of Different Hay Feeders, Availability of Roughage on Abnormal Behaviors and Cortisol Circadian Rhythm in Horses Kept in Dry Lots, *Journal of Equine Veterinary Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jevs.2023.104911](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jevs.2023.104911)

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