

## Secret to a Healthy Horse

By Dr. Juliet Getty

To learn more about what Dr. Getty does or to read her other articles, please visit her [website](#).

### Calling All Healthy Horses! What is your Secret?

We know you're out there. Horses who are enjoying life. Horses who are brimming with health – strong muscles, shiny coats, hard hooves, good digestion, normal metabolism, strong immune function – just plain healthy! How do you do it? What is it about your care and feeding that allows you to enjoy such wellbeing?



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We're always searching for answers. Our typical approach is to study sick horses. But that only helps us to understand the disease. We look at fat horses to understand fat horses. We look at horses with pain, metabolic problems, and digestive ailments to understand those who are experiencing the same hardships. While such research is worthwhile, wouldn't it also make sense to evaluate fit, hearty horses so we can strive to make our own horses be more like them? Shouldn't we be looking at what healthy horse's experience?

### Here's what a healthy horse would say to you:

- **My owner doesn't stuff me with excess calories.** Obesity is a real problem and it comes from piling on the calories, combined with lack of physical activity. Forage is the staple of my diet and is steadily flowing throughout my entire gastrointestinal tract. Pounds and pounds of concentrated feeds would shorten my life.
- **I don't get fat during the winter.** If I were living in a natural setting, feed would be sparse during the winter months. I would graze continually, but I would not have as many calories, so I wouldn't become overweight. Then, when the spring grasses come, I would enjoy them without the risk of developing laminitis because my body has not been unnaturally put in a state of insulin resistance (through too much body fat). My owner feeds me all the quality, varied forages I want, and only enough concentrates to meet my needs.
- **Stress is not in my daily life.** I can eat when I want to and not rely on my owner's schedule – forage (preferably fresh grasses) is available to me all throughout the day and night. My owners understand my need to graze, roam, socialize, and eat a variety of plants. I have companionship to protect me against threats (real and perceived), which calms me down and permits me to truly rest. I don't get ulcers, and I don't get laminitis. I don't colic, and I am easy to get along with.

You see, the hormonal response to stress is capable of doing terrible things to my body – I'm more likely to develop infections, allergies, and skin disorders. I'm more likely to become insulin resistant. Free radicals are produced, potentially damaging every tissue in my body including my brain, blood vessels, hooves, eyes, skin, and digestive tract. Instead, I am allowed to self-regulate my intake of grasses according to my own instincts. If you have any doubt about my need for forage flowing through my digestive tract at all times, educate yourself about how my digestive system works. And, oh, by the way, I am not forced to wear contraptions that inhibit my natural way of living.

- **My immune system is strong.** Besides living a life the way nature intended, my owner fills in the nutritional gaps that occur when I am fed dead grass (hay) by giving me the proper vitamins and minerals I need to stay healthy. I also get omega 3s and I'm fed a variety of protein sources to supply a large enough amino acid pool

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so my body can produce and repair tissues, keep my blood proteins where they need to be, and allow me to naturally fight off disease.

- **I am allowed to move.** You might enjoy sitting in a small space for hours at a time, but we horses do not like cozy places – I need to run away from that gust of wind or bolt of lightning. I am in fear for my life when I cannot move. The stress (though I may not show it) is real and takes its toll on my health. Furthermore, standing in one place wreaks havoc on my body. If I must be kept confined, my owner makes sure I get plenty of exercise every day – exercise keeps my digestive system healthy and without it, I develop ulcers and colic. My hooves become weak and thin, my joints deteriorate, and my overall natural healing ability is diminished. And let's not forget becoming overweight – exercise not only burns calories, but it makes my cells more receptive to insulin, allowing my body to burn fat.
- **As I age, my needs are met.** My creaky joints do best when my muscles are strong. My owner encourages me to move and feeds me enough quality protein, vitamin C, and omega 3s to slow down the progression of arthritis. My teeth are cared for and my owner checks my blood for proper kidney and liver function. Since saliva production diminishes as I age, my food is moist so I can chew better, and I'm always permitted to eat at ground level to avoid choking.
- **My diet is varied and nutritious.** Eating the same thing day in and day out, even if it is nutritious, can lead to nutritional imbalances. My owner gives me variety! A pasture that is thick with one type of grass is not going to keep me healthy. I need different types of grasses, lots of weeds, bushes, berries, flowers, and trees – I need choices. I can judge what I need when I'm given much to choose from.

## Keep it simple

Now you've heard it from the Healthy Horse himself. We are so busy micromanaging our horses' lives and their diets that we have forgotten the basics: Fresh air, water, and companionship, freedom to move, and fresh grasses and plants. The ideal is a pasture with plenty of variety where all you need to add is water and salt. Most of us do not have this amount of land to offer our horses, and must rely on hay. Choose a mixed grass hay, but realize that hay basically provides forage for a healthy digestive tract; it is missing so many key nutrients that you must also feed a good vitamin/mineral supplement, a source of omega 3 fatty acids, and may need to improve the protein quality by adding other protein sources.

Your horse will thank you. And you can have the satisfaction of knowing that you are giving your horse a lifetime of vibrant health.

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