

## Toxic Horse Treats

Before you share a snack with your horse, find out which ones are truly safe for horses.

By Anna O'Brien, DVM | October 2014



*Apples are generally considered a safe treat for horses, but what about other fruits and vegetables?*

As horse lovers, time isn't the only thing we like to share with our animals. Who hasn't raided her fridge for some spare carrots to share after a trail ride? Or what about those leftover peppermints from the holidays? From sugar cubes to apples, most of the treats we give to our horses on occasion are perfectly fine, but there are items from your kitchen cabinet that shouldn't wind up at the barn. Read on to find out which treats are safe for your horse and which are not.

### **Fruit**

Most fruit makes a great horse treat. Many are naturally sweet and require minimal—if any—preparation. Here is a basic list of horse-safe fruit to get you started:

- Apricots (without pit)
- Apples (without core)
- Berries (including strawberry, blueberry, blackberry, raspberry, loganberry)
- Banana

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- Cantaloupe (without rind)
- Grapes
- Mango
- Orange and other citrus
- Peach
- Pear
- Pineapples
- Plums (and prunes)
- Watermelon

Yes, apple seeds do contain the toxic chemical arsenic. However, the greater threat for horses that eat apple cores is choke. Apple slices are the safest way to offer apple treats to your horse.

Apricot pits are also toxic, and if ingested, produce clinical signs similar to those of cyanide poisoning. As with apples, don't offer whole apricots to your horse—sliced or pitted apricots are the best way to go.

### **Vegetables**

Vegetables aren't quite as benevolent as fruits in terms of potential horse treats. Carrots are great, as are squash of all types, celery, and green beans, but there are a few families of related veggies that shouldn't be given to horses. For example, members of the Brassica family, which includes broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, and Brussels sprouts, should not be given to horses. Lettuce, however, is horse-safe.

Tomatoes are an interesting option. Tomato plants are toxic to horses; they are in fact members of the nightshade family. However, the tomato fruit itself is not toxic. Horse owners should be advised not to throw old tomato plants from the garden into horse pasture as an unintentionally toxic treat.

Garlic and onions are other vegetables that are toxic to horses and shouldn't be offered as treats. Avocado, too, is another plant that's best to stay away from; the avocado itself isn't toxic, but its skin, pit, and leaves from the plant are poisonous. Cooked versus raw vegetables also make a difference. Cooked potatoes are okay for horses on a limited basis, but raw potatoes should never be given to horses.

### **Sweets and Processed Treats**

While the occasional nibble of bread is okay for most horses, certain ingredients in baked goods and other prepared foods can be toxic. Take, for example, chocolate. Just like dogs, horses are sensitive to the chemical theobromine in chocolate and therefore large amounts of chocolate are toxic to horses.

While an occasional stolen Snickers isn't enough to be a problem, there are cases where unintentional exposure to large amounts of cocoa are lethal to horses. Some reports of chocolate toxicity in horses are reported after animals were bedded in stalls with cocoa husks, a by-product of cocoa farming.

Caffeine can also be toxic to horses in large quantities. Similar to chocolate, cases of caffeine toxicity in horses have resulted after horses were bedded with the husks from coffee plants. Examples such as these provide another glimpse into ways horses can inadvertently be poisoned from good intentions. This can act as a

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helpful reminder to horse owners to be vigilant: "treats" from well-meaning but uninformed neighbors, such as yard and garden clippings, items pulled from the compost bin, or extras from the local bakery should not be given to horses for consumption or used as bedding.

### **Special Considerations**

For certain horses, even non-toxic treats can have a negative effect on health. Horses that are obese, prone to founder, and those who suffer from insulin resistance need to have their diets tightly restricted in terms of sugar and starch intake. For this reason, most fruits are off-limits to these horses. Even the trusty horse-safe standbys such as apples and carrots are too sugary. However, apple peels make a great treat for horses with metabolic issues. Banana peels work, too. This way, your horse is getting a sweet treat without the bulk of the sugar, plus some dietary fiber.

For horses with HYPP, stay away from foods containing high levels of potassium. Bananas are a definite no-no for these horses due to their relatively high potassium content, as are apricots and plums, particularly in their dried form as prunes. Another unsuspecting culprit is pumpkin. A great festive snack after Halloween, pumpkin is high in vitamins and has a low glycemic index, so it's safe for our insulin-resistant horses but it does have a large amount of potassium, making it a no-go for those with HYPP.

Senior horses are another group to give careful consideration to when deciding on treats. With poor dentition, older horses are at higher risk for choke. Hard crunchy snacks should be broken into small pieces for easier chewing, or soaked in water to soften. Pits and large seeds should be removed as well as any thick or tough rinds that may require strategic nibbling. Applesauce is a great treat for older horses—all the sweetness of an apple without the hassle of chewing!

We love our horses and love sharing our lives with them. Sharing treats with our equine companions is just another part of the fun. Knowing what you can safely feed your horse will make sharing that much more enjoyable.

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