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VOLUME 78

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- Improve your horse's mealtime manners
- The best feeding techniques
- Reduce your horse's laminitis risk

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Improve your horse's MEALTIME MANNERS

Even the worst feeding-related behavioral problems can be solved with patient and consistent training.

By Jennifer Williams, PhD

Feeding can be one of the most satisfying of barn chores: From the gentle, anticipatory nickers of the horses as you open the feed room door to their eager attentiveness as you pour grain into tubs, to the sense of nurturing that swells within you as you listen to the sounds of a barnful of horses contentedly chewing.

On the other hand, feeding time can be a nightmare, full of aggressive pinned-eared squealing, stall-door barging and incessant wall kicking. Whether it's directed from one horse to another or toward the person with the feed scoop, this behavior is not only unsettling, it can be dangerous for everyone involved.

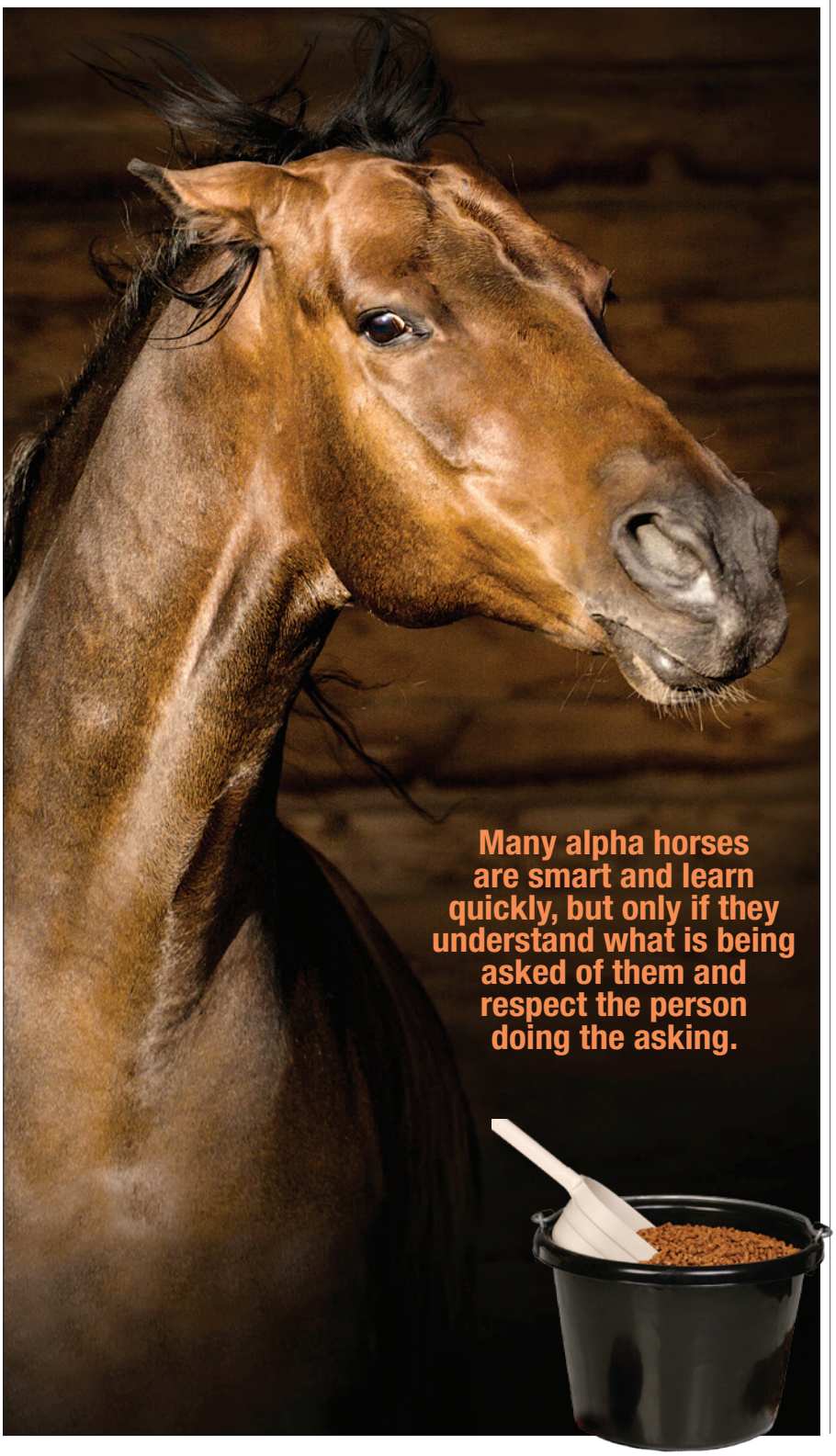
If anything close to the nightmare scenario plays out at your barn, you need to do something about it. Not just for your own safety and sanity, but because the underlying cause is a fundamental behavioral problem that needs to be identified and solved. If you take the time to address the situation, chances are you'll see improvements in other areas of your horse's behavior as well.

Like all behavioral issues, feeding-time tantrums vary in cause and intensity. In my years as a horse owner and through my work with rescue horses, I've handled horses across the mealtime misbehavior spectrum. Though there are many variations, I've identified three types of horses who commonly act up when food is delivered: The aggressive dominant horse, the insecure horse and the horse who has developed the behavior after living in a neglect situation where food was scarce. Identifying which of these applies to your ill-mannered horse can be tough, but it's important because the best approach to take is different for each.

I've also learned that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to these behavioral problems. Instead, you need to take a trial-and-error approach to see what works for a specific horse and situation. The process can be frustrating and time consuming, for sure, but the good news is that with two or more mealtimes a day, you have lots of opportunities for progress and success.

To get you started, I've described three hypothetical horses—each one a composite of horses I've seen with various types of food aggression. If you see your own mealtime monster in any of these profiles, the explanations and tips that follow may hold the key to understanding and changing the behaviors.

The aggressive dominant horse



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Madge is an alpha mare in every respect. When she walks up to the pasture gate at feeding time, the herd parts respectfully to allow her to pass. In her stall, awaiting grain, she kicks at the wall and squeals, sending her neighbor scrambling. She doesn't charge the door as you enter but stands glaring at you with her ears pinned. You'll need to keep a close eye on her as you dump her grain or she'll snake her head out and bite your arm in a flash. Once she has her grain, she takes her time eating, positioning herself with her rump toward the door, cocked and ready to kick at anyone who tries to enter.

Madge probably has dominance-related food aggression. This type of horse wants everyone—horse and human alike—to stay away from her feed bucket simply because it's hers. At the most innocuous level, these horses use threatening body language to ward off anyone who might have eyes on their food. At their most dangerous, they lash out with teeth and hooves, and they don't back down when challenged because they are used to getting their own way.

Your first instinct may be to withhold grain from a horse who threatens you at feeding time. And, in some cases, this tactic can work very well. I had a mare once who would charge into the barn when I opened the gate at feeding time and kick as she passed me. I decided to stop feeding her any grain when she acted that way. She was a bit on the chubby side and wasn't at risk of wasting away if she missed a meal or two.

The first time I fed the other horses but gave this mare no grain, she was mad. She threw her hay around her stall and made horrible faces. The next feeding time, she was still in a rush to get to her stall, but she didn't kick out. I

don't know exactly what motivated the change in behavior, but she didn't kick so she got her grain. It took a few weeks and maybe six missed meals, but she realized that when she didn't kick, she got fed. She never kicked again for the next eight years I owned her.

If that mare hadn't made that connection quickly, however, withholding grain could have made the situation worse because she would have become increasingly frustrated and angry. In cases where withholding feed doesn't help, your best approach is to reestablish control over the horse through lots of groundwork. You want to ensure your horse doesn't encroach on your personal space when grain isn't involved. Start by teaching your horse to back up away from you upon request with your body language or command. Once he readily complies to those cues, do the same exercises when grain is delivered. Many alpha horses are smart and learn quickly, but only if they understand what is being asked of them and respect the person doing the asking.

Training can be a slow process, and you have to be extremely careful as you do it. Work in a safe space with plenty of room to move, always be on guard and wear proper shoes and a helmet. If you are intimidated by the horse or unsure how to proceed, seek help from a professional trainer.

The ideal trainer will not only teach your horse how to behave at mealtimes but will show you how to maintain that behavior without escalating the aggression. I have trained food-aggressive horses to back away from me and wait for their grain at the back of their stalls when I make a low growling sound, but you can never assume they will behave properly. Always be alert and prepared to correct the horse while protecting yourself.

The insecure horse

Winston is a low-ranking herd member. He's the first kicked out of the run-in shed when it rains and is regularly run off from the hay feeder by his herdmates. At feeding time he is a panicked mess. He'll barge the door as you enter with grain and spin in circles as you attempt to dump it in his tub. If you aren't careful, he'll walk right over you to get to his meal. And once he has his grain, Winston still doesn't settle down; he paws as he eats or continually darts from the feed tub to the stall door and back.

Insecurity is likely fueling Winston's mealtime misbehavior. Insecure horses are worried that someone, horse or human, is going to take their food, so they are on guard at all times. These horses never fully settle down to eat and may bolt their feed or fling it around the stall as they pace. They may bite and kick in their efforts to guard their grain, but they are anxious rather than aggressive.

One of the most effective ways to manage insecure eaters is to give them a quiet place to eat, far from others. Try putting the horse in stall at the end of the aisle and feeding him first, before the sounds of opening grain bins set off nickers throughout the barn. Or try feeding this horse in a round pen or small paddock with a buddy. Grain delivered in a low-key way and enjoyed with a trusted companion can settle down an anxious horse quickly, and the unwanted behavior will disappear.

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In addition, try to follow a predictable feeding routine. That means delivering feed to the same stalls, in the same order at the same time every day. If an anxious horse knows when food is coming and how it will be delivered, you've removed some of the uncertainty from his life.

It may take some time to learn which routine helps an insecure horse the most, so you need to be willing to experiment with even the smallest details. One gelding who lived with us for a while was extremely insecure and fretful at feeding time. He would get so worked up that he'd try to bite the person delivering his grain. I discovered, however, that if I put the food in his tub in the stall before he entered, we'd avoid all of that. He would be led to his stall, find the grain waiting for him and simply settle down to eat.

MIND YOUR **OWN** MANNERS

When setting expectations for your horses at mealtimes, make sure that your own actions encourage good behavior. Each of the following human habits can contribute to mealtime problems.

- **Allowing a free-for-all dash to stalls.** On smaller farms it's not uncommon to allow horses to walk themselves the short distance from paddock to stall at mealtime, and the practice can be a real timesaver. But you need to keep control of the situation. Allow only one horse at a time to return to his stall and if any horse charges or bolts, revoke that privilege and walk him in on a lead, occasionally reminding him of his manners with a bit of groundwork halfway there.
- **Being slow with your delivery.** When feeding a small group of horses, try to minimize the amount of time between the delivery of meals from first to last. If the horse in the end stall has to listen to his barnmates eat for 20 minutes before seeing his own meal, agitation is understandable. Dole out portions into smaller buckets, complete with supplements and medications, and deliver them to stalls in rapid succession.
- **Interrupting meals.** Fussing with an eating horse will try his patience. If you can, hold off on grooming, stall cleaning, blanketing, wrapping or other activities until your horse has finished his meal.

Grumpy old horse?

Any potentially dangerous behavior can't be ignored, but when a horse is simply grumpy—that is, the extent of his acting out is pinned ears or evil looks—you might decide that you're OK with less-than-perfect behavior. I had gelding who was a gentleman at feeding time for 18 years. But then he began to pin his ears whenever grain was around. Because the behavior didn't escalate to biting or kicking and didn't show up at any other time, I decided to not address it directly. I kept an eye on him, but let him pin his ears as long as it never went beyond that. In my mind, he'd earned the right to be a bit of a grumpy old man.—*Jennifer Williams, PhD*

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The horse worried about his next meal

Rain was found alone in a muddy paddock on an abandoned property. He was injured, withdrawn, dehydrated and extremely thin. Working through local law enforcement, a rescue group took him in and began nursing him back to health. As he picked up weight, his energy level rose and his personality emerged. Unfortunately, he also became aggressive at mealtimes. Whenever grain was delivered or even a treat was offered, Rain became fixated and lashed out at anyone or anything that he perceived as coming between him and the food. Just the sight of a grain bucket would send him charging and flinging his head in an effort to reach it.

Unfortunately, I see this type of behavior often in rescue cases. These horses may have not had feed for long stretches of time in their lives. Or, they had to compete with herdmates for scarce resources. When these horses are given food, they don't know when they will see it again, and a powerful survival instinct kicks in. Two of the worst food aggressive horses I've seen were formerly food-starved.

This behavior may disappear on its own with time and consistency. Simply learning that meals come on a regular basis can be enough to make some horses settle down. It can take a year or two, however, for them to come to the realization that they will no longer be deprived of food, and during that time you need to be careful and understanding. Withholding food as punishment for misbehavior will make the problem worse—it would confirm their fears. Becoming physical with these horses—for example, smacking them to get them to back away from you—can create a new set of fears that lead to more aggressive behavior. Of course, you need to establish ground manners, but you must never lose your temper.

In these instances, rewarding desirable behavior can be very useful. "Clicker training" is one technique for shaping behavior by linking the sound of the clicker to a reward. This technique takes time to learn and requires that you become exceptionally attuned to the horse, but it can be worthwhile in difficult cases.

When these horses are given food, they don't know when they will see it again, and a powerful survival instinct kicks in.

I've used clicker training only once, on a foster horse who was found as a stray. The problem wasn't just feeding—he was so afraid of people that everything was an issue. Over many weeks, though, I was able to reward him for standing calmly as I approached. And

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GROUP DINING

While the advice in this article focuses on situations where horses receive their meals in individual stalls, I realize that many field-kept horses are fed in large groups while still outdoors. If you choose that method, any aggressive mealtime behaviors will affect herdmates much more so than people. But it doesn't make them less problematic. Lower-ranking horses will quickly learn to give a wide berth to dominant animals at mealtimes, missing out on food in the process. If your field-fed dominant horses are picking up weight while others are on the slim side, it's time to modify your field-feeding method. Here are few techniques you can try:

- **Remove the most dominant, or least dominant, herd members at each meal and feed them separately.** By taking away the worst bully, you give the rest of the herd a chance to eat in peace. Alternatively, you could you pull the lowest-ranking herd member out of the field and feed him alone.
- **Put out more feed buckets than there are horses.** Add two or three extra buckets with small amounts of grain in them. As horses are pushed off their meals by higher ranking horses, they can move to another station to continue eating.
- **Use feed bags.** Delivering each horse's meal in a bag that attaches to their head with a crownpiece will end squabbles over buckets of grain. It will require a bit of extra work to put the bags on the horses, remove them after each meal, and clean them regularly, but the reward is calm mealtimes that allow all the horses to receive their full ration.—*Jennifer Williams, PhD*

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then to stand calmly as he was handled and fed. I had been a skeptic about clicker training until then, but it really did work.

Beyond retraining, how you manage a formerly starved animal can improve his mealtime behavior. Feeding him alone, as you might an insecure horse, can help give him the confidence to eat peacefully. It also helps to make hay available at all times, providing reassurance to these horses that they'll never have to go hungry.

As with most other equine misbehavior, mealtime problems are best dealt with early. The sooner you revisit ground manners, establish boundaries and address a horse's insecurities, the more likely you are to prevent problem behaviors from becoming deeply ingrained.

But I've found that even the toughest cases can be reformed with patient and consistent training. And the rewards are great—in addition to increasing the safety of all involved, you can make feeding time something you look forward to again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Jennifer Williams, PhD, is the founder and president of Bluebonnet Equine Humane Society located in College Station, Texas, and the author of the book *How to Start and Run a Rescue.* Williams received her Bachelor of Science in psychology and minor in equine science from Truman State University, formerly known as Northeast Missouri State University. Later Williams earned her master's and doctorate in animal science from Texas A&M, where she focused her studies on equine behavior, learning and welfare.

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6 ways to reduce your horse's laminitis risk

By Christine Barakat
with Melinda Freckleton, DVM
Photos by Getty Images

Knowing your horse's risk status is the first step in preventing this devastating hoof condition.

Laminitis looms large on the list of feared equine diseases—and with good reason. The condition, characterized by inflammation of the sensitive laminae inside the hoof, can take a variety of forms, but all are painful, potentially crippling and often fatal. However, laminitis is also largely preventable.

Over the past decade, research into the physiological processes that lead to laminitis has made it clear that the disease usually doesn't strike "out of the blue." In fact, clear profiles are emerging of the individual traits and circumstances that increase susceptibility to laminitis. With this information, you can identify horses at risk and take specific steps to protect them.

1. Know your horse's specific risk status. All horses need to be protected from laminitis, but some require more vigilance than others. The poster horse for high laminitis risk is an inactive and overweight easy-keeper. Horses with insulin resistance—a condition in which liver and fat cells do not respond normally to insulin—are also at greater risk, as are those with Cushing's disease, an endocrine disorder that leads to excess production of the hormone cortisol. And, of course, any horse who has had laminitis in the past is at a high risk for recurrence.

2. Limit his access to lush pasture. The majority of laminitis cases are so-called "pasture laminitis," triggered by the sugars in grasses. Although lush spring pasture is most commonly associated with laminitis, research shows that grass can contain high levels of fructan, the most dangerous sugar, at any time of year. However, turnout is important for any horse's physical and mental health, so talk to your veterinarian about using a grazing muzzle to limit or prevent your horse's grass intake. Or consider establishing a grass-free "dry lot" for your horse.

3. Restrict his intake of carbs and sugars. It's not just pasture that can trigger laminitis: Sugars and starches in feed, treats and even some hays can trigger the disorder. If your horse is at risk, scrutinize his diet for excesses. Sweet and senior feeds can be high in sugar, but nearly every feed company offers alternative products formulated with laminitis prevention in mind. Also consider having each batch of the hay you purchase tested at a local agriculture laboratory. Finally, instead of offering apples and peppermints as treats, switch to celery or treats specifically formulated for horses on restricted diets.

4. Keep his weight in check. Obesity is a significant contributor to laminitis. Decreasing a horse's weight typically requires dietary changes as well as regular exercise. Work with your veterinarian to formulate a weight-loss plan for your horse, and do not be surprised if it includes drastic changes in his (and your) activity levels.

5. Identify and control Cushing's disease. An estimated 70 percent of horses over the age of 20 develop Cushing's disease, a malfunction of the pituitary gland that leads to hormonal imbalances. Signs of the disorder include a persistent hair coat, excessive thirst, muscle wasting and general lethargy. Diagnostic blood tests for Cushing's are available but aren't reliable at certain times of the year. As a diagnostic alternative, your veterinarian may recommend simply beginning treatment and looking for improvement. Cushing's can be controlled with the drug pergolide, which is sold for horses under the name Prascend.

6. Keep his feet in good shape. The structures of overgrown or unbalanced hooves may become so stressed that they cannot withstand even a minor laminitic episode. And neglect alone can also trigger mechanical laminitis, a structural failure that occurs without a systemic insult. Keep your horse on a regular farriery schedule.

SECONDARY LAMINITIS

In addition to laminitis resulting from hormonal imbalances or dietary issues, the disorder sometimes occurs in the wake of serious illness or injury:

- Laminitis that strikes after a severe systemic illness, such as Potomac horse fever, is likely related to circulating endotoxins released when bacteria are destroyed. To reduce this risk, a horse will receive medications and intravenous fluids.
- After a horse injures a limb, the "good" limb on the opposite side can be subject to excessive, prolonged weight-bearing that precipitates mechanical laminitis. A farrier can help protect the hoof on the uninjured leg with specialized shoeing. You can also encourage the horse to get off his feet more with deep bedding and comfortable surroundings.

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