



# FACT SHEET

Department of Animal Science, University of Connecticut

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Effective Horse Management - Horse Management Series

## Weight Management in Horses – Slow Feeders

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Some horses do not require as much feed as others to maintain a healthy weight and also gain weight quickly. The horse industry terms them “easy keepers” because it does not cost much to maintain them. To avoid having horses gain too much weight, horse owners may want to consider the use of slow feeders.

A slow feeder decreases the amount of forage a horse can get with each bite it takes. Slow feeders come in numerous designs such as in the form a hay net with smaller openings than a regular hay net or a feeder that has bars across it with small openings so that the horses cannot get large mouthfuls of hay. A slow feed hay net may be made from regular netting used in hay nets or webbing mesh. Some people have also fashioned their own hard sided slow feeders using rubber tubs. The benefit of these slow feeders is that they enable the horse to graze as it normally would allow it to behave like a horse but reduces calorie consumption. This also reduces boredom for the horse as it takes them much longer to consume a similar quantity of forage

There are pros and cons of each type of feeder. A slow feeder using a regular hay net style allows the horse to eat using his lips. Some forms require no hanging but are meant for barefoot horses, since a shod horse could catch its shoe on the material. This style is quick to load and easy to transport. In the past, there has been some concerns

about these types of slow feeders wearing enamel off the teeth, but two recent studies suggest that hay net type slow feeders do not negatively impact dental health. Webbing type of slow feeders usually have an opening at the top, which making filling them very easy but may allow horses to access large amounts of hay quickly. To prevent this, the bag must be hung higher which can result in the horse having to eat with its head in a more unnatural position. Hay also seems to get consumed faster with the webbing than in a hay net type of slow feeder. It can also wear the enamel off the horse's teeth if they have to scrape their teeth across the webbing, although as stated above, studies of hay net type slow feeders have found no negative impacts on dental health.

Hard sided slow feeders can be fashioned in at least two different ways. Two rubber sided feed tubs can be used and you can create holes in the top one. The other method is to cover the rubber sided feed tub with a metal grate. These styles may not slow down the rate of consumption by that much. Also, if the ends of the hay are flattened by being in the tub, the horses cannot get access to the hay. Filling them was quick but they get heavy and need to be moved with a wheelbarrow if you want to put them in different locations. The feeder with holes may wear the enamel off the horse's teeth. The feeder with the metal grate can cause grooves in the teeth.

A recent survey with 1,283 responses found that the main reason people used slow feeders were for weight reduction, increased feeding time for horses, and weight management. Eighty-five percent of respondents used hay nets. Less than 10% of the respondents reported any health problems or accidents. More than 65% of those surveyed had been using slow feeders for more than 5 years.

In a study conducted in 2023, 15 polo horses were divided into three groups and each group spent 15 days eating hay from a box feeder (an automatic hay box that offered free choice hay for 1 hour six times a day through large square bales placed in the feeder), a traditional feeder (elevated V feeder) offering unlimited hay 24/7, and unlimited access to hay using a slow feeder net for square hay bales). Horses fed with the free choice traditional feeder consumed more hay, gained more body weight, and wasted more hay daily. Horses fed with the free choice traditional feeder and the slow feeder spent more than 50% of their time budget foraging, which was similar to grazing horses. Horses fed from the box feeder spent less time eating and more time standing, sniffing the ground, practicing coprophagy (eating manure), and showed the highest aggression. There was no difference in any of the group's cortisol circadian rhythms, indicating no increase in stress. Other studies have found that slow feeders did not increase frustration in horses.

In conclusion, it seems that slow feeders can help to reduce weight gain. They should not increase stress or frustration in horses. It also appears that feeders using netting may be best at slowing consumption.

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