

Hay-making used

to be the most common method of conserving forage for winter feeding, but finding good hay seems to be getting harder and the demand for haylage has increased. The nutritive value of hay and haylage can be hugely variable so appropriate analyses should be undertaken.

HAY QUALITY

Successful hay-making entails drying the cut grass to a moisture level of 15% or less to inhibit mould development. There are two predominant types of hay:

MEADOW HAY	SEED HAY
Harvested from traditional pastures or meadows	Harvested from a residual grass seed crop
Often contains many different grass species	Usually contains only 1 or 2 grass species; often timothy or ryegrass
Usually leafier than seed hay and may have higher protein and energy levels	Often a lower leaf:stalk ratio than meadow hay
May be more digestible than seed hay	May have a lower feed value than meadow hay because it has been allowed to seed

Hay quality can also be affected by the following:

- Stage of growth - hay made from mature herbage will be "stalkier" and will therefore have a lower nutritional value than a leafy hay which has been cut early.
- Soil type and quality - this is influenced by regional differences and land use patterns.
- Presence of weeds - for example, thistles and docks are unpalatable and poorly digested. Do not feed hay which contains poisonous weeds such as ragwort.
- Climate during harvest - a warm, dry, windy day is ideal for harvesting hay. If drying is prolonged nutrient losses increase due to the action of plant and microbial enzymes, chemical oxidation and leaching. Damp hay is often contaminated with high levels of mould and dust spores.

- Storage conditions - hay should be stored in a well ventilated barn soon after baling. "Heating" occurs due to microbial activity and is more likely in damp, poorly harvested hay. This results in high levels of undesirable mould spores as well as leading to nutrient losses due to residual respiration.

MOULD AND DUST SPORES

Hay which has been badly made (especially when too damp at baling), or poorly stored can be dusty and/or mouldy. Most of these spores can be harmful and will contribute to respiratory diseases like COPD. Even the best hay will contain some mould and dust spores so all hay should be soaked before feeding.

- Completely submerge your hay for 1/2 an hour and feed it wet. As the spores absorb the water they swell and stick to the hay so they are ingested rather than inhaled.
- Soaking hay for longer than 2 hours may result in significant nutrient loss (Warr et al, Moore-Colyer et al).
- Use fresh water every time you soak your hay and dispose of the waste water carefully.
- If your horse or pony suffers from a respiratory disorder you may find a dust free alternative such as haylage more suitable. Please feel free to call the Dodson and Horrell Helpline on 01933 624221 if you would like to discuss the management of a horse or pony with respiratory problems.

