

Your horse and haylage*

Haylage is a high moisture hay that has been compressed and encased in plastic within hours of harvesting. Since no air can reach the hay an anaerobic environment is created which encourages certain bacteria to ferment the plant fibres and create a moist, soft food which most horses enjoy. In fact most horses will prefer haylage to hay if given the choice.

One of the big differences between hay and haylage is in the moisture content. Hay has less than 15% moisture and haylage can have 50% or more. Also, since haylage is cut and bagged promptly its nutrient content is more like pasture. Most of the leaves are preserved and with them important vitamins and minerals. With hay there is a lot of leaf lost during processing leaving a higher amount of stalks.

Haylage tends to have much less dust and is therefore a better choice when horses are travelling. It is also easier to chew and slightly more digestible than hay.

The disadvantages of haylage are (a) if the plastic covering is broken oxygen can gain access to it and can spoil the feed and make it unsafe for horses, (b) it should be fed within a day or two of opening the plastic wrapping as mould spores can rapidly multiply in it, (c) because of its high moisture content more haylage than hay must be fed in order to provide the same amount of fibre, (d) it is believed that because haylage is bagged within hours of harvesting there is a very small risk that rodents or birds may be caught up when it is baled (with hay they have time to escape). The dead animals in an anaerobic environment can allow the botulism bacterium to multiply. When eaten by horses it can cause death. In New Zealand, however, botulism of horses is extremely rare.

* This information was taken from "Forage Alternatives" by Karen Biggs 'The Horse' January 2001.