

Feeding Hay: Rack vs. On The Ground

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Question:

I am wondering if it makes any difference if you feed hay on the ground or in a hay net or rack. I have been reading these books that say you should never feed a horse hay on the ground, but it never gave a specific reason. at the barn that I ride at (and the previous barn) they feed hay on the ground, and all the horses there seem fine. Is there any difference?

Answer:

Hay racks in stalls are really for the convenience of horse-owners and stable staff - it's supposed to keep the hay in one place (more about this later), and it enables the humans walking down the barn aisle to tell at a glance which horses still have hay in the racks and which do not. Beyond that, though, racks aren't terribly useful, for several reasons.

Horses are designed to eat off the ground. Their respiratory systems cannot stay clear unless they can put their heads down, and asking them to eat with their heads high is not particularly good for their health. When horses have to reach across and up (instead of down) for their hay, it's not good for their respiratory systems, they get a lot more dust in their noses and eyes, and they also run the risk of getting bits of hay in their eyes. Since the equine eye is very large, very delicate, not well protected at all, and extremely susceptible to injury and infection, it's silly to take the risk.

The purpose of hay racks is really two-fold: They are intended to keep the hay together, in one area, so that the horse won't waste its hay by making a nest of it or using it for a toilet. They are also intended to help horses avoid taking in sand with their hay, because the ingestion of sand can lead to colic. I'll address each purpose in turn.

A hay rack can serve to keep the hay in one place, but it's more sensible and healthy to make a corner feeder in the horse's stall by putting short boards across one corner, starting at the stall floor and going up to about two feet off the ground. This small area can serve all the purposes of a hay-rack, but as it will enable the horse to eat in a natural position, it will keep the hay in one place without creating any problems for the horse.

If you are worried about the horse stepping into the corner, you can use a tire as a softer hay-containment unit.

As for the sand colic, the best way to guard against the horse taking in too much dirt and sand with its hay is to keep a rubber mat or tarp under the hay, whether the hay is in a tire or in a rack. If you've ever watched a horse eat hay from a high rack, you know what happens. The horse pulls a wisp of hay away from the rack and chews it, and tiny bits of hay fall from the rack and from the wisp in the horse's mouth. By the time the rack is empty, there is a good deal of hay - in tiny pieces - on the ground under the rack. The horse, having emptied the hay rack, then spends a happy half-hour or so seeking out and eating every tiny bit of fallen hay... which is now on the ground. This is especially noticeable if your horse is being fed alfalfa (lucerne), as the best leafy bits tend to fall to the ground each time the horse pulls a few stems out of the rack.

Sometimes there are good reasons for using some sort of container for hay, even in pasture. If horses are in a pasture or dry lot and being fed hay ad lib, it's usually best to confine the hay to a rack of some sort just to keep it from being dragged all over the pasture, trodden on, etc. Racks designed to hold large bales for pasture consumption usually provide access to hay just a few feet off the ground, which isn't such a problem for the horse's respiratory system or eyes. However, if the ground is very sandy, the horses are likely to be ingesting a considerable amount of sand - which brings us back to the idea of using mats or a tarp under/around the rack.

If the rack is under cover, as it should be if there is any possibility of rain (large bales are always at risk for mold), it shouldn't be too onerous to put and keep mats underneath it.

When a horse is being given hay in a trailer, there's a clear need for a hay bag or hay net. The large, open bags that attach at three or four corners are probably the most useful, and they should be fastened no higher than chest height, in front of the breast bar.

Hay nets are traditionally attached rather high, but that's not for the good of the horse's respiratory system - it's meant to prevent the horse getting a foot caught in an emptied and dangling hay net. (Properly fastened hay nets are tied at both top and bottom, and thus won't dangle in this manner in any case, but that's another story!)