

Ask A Vet: Psyllium in Horse Feed is Preventive

Saturday, April 8, 2017

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I was at the feed store recently, and saw many products that contain psyllium and say that they can help with sand. Is this a big problem in horses, and should I consider adding this to my horse's feed?

-Worried About Sand

Dear Worried,

That is an excellent question, and addresses a problem that we are seeing with increasing frequency. Psyllium is the common name for a group of plants which produce a long grain, insoluble fiber that produces mucilage when it gets wet. What that means is that when these plant fibers or husks get wet, they become a sticky, gelatinous glob. Psyllium is found in many horse and human products. The most common human product that you would be familiar with is Metamucil. Psyllium fibers do not dissolve in the GI tract. As they get wet, they expand, get sticky, and can pick up any small particles within the GI tract that cannot normally be moved out. Where this becomes relevant to horses is the removal of sand and other particulate matter from your horse's intestines.

As horses graze or eat hay off of the ground, they often consume small amounts of sand and dirt. In small amounts, or if the sand stays trapped inside the fecal material, this won't cause a problem. However, if the horse tends to take mouthfuls of sand/dirt while eating, or if the small amounts of sand settle out within the GI tract, then it will stay there. Because the particles are so small and tend to allow the digesta to pass over top of them, the sand particles cannot be moved by normal peristaltic waves. This sand build up can prevent normal nutrient absorption leading to weight loss, inability to gain weight, and/or diarrhea. The sand particles can also (in the right conditions) glue together to become a literal stone in the intestine; this stone is called a cololith or enterolith. This stone can become as large as a grapefruit with the potential of blocking the intestines. Finally, the sand can weigh down the GI tract, pinching the guts and leading to what is often referred to as a sand colic. Frequently, these conditions may require surgery to remove all of the sand or sand products.

Psyllium is often used when any of these conditions is suspected. It is also used as a preventative if the horse is known to be an aggressive eater while food is on the ground, or while grazing. Additionally, if your horse is on sandy soil, there is a potential that over time the sand could become a problem. In treatment regimens, psyllium is used aggressively. As a preventative, most clients treat their horses once weekly or one week of every month. Check with your veterinarian or consult the packaging on any of the psyllium products. Hopefully this answers your questions regarding the purpose and uses of psyllium, and leads to questions that you can ask your veterinarian to see if your horse could benefit from using any of these products.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman