**How do horses digest food**

Each part of the horse’s digestive system plays a role in processing food and water.

**Mouth**: Horses use their lips and tongue to find and grasp food. The tongue and teeth then chew and grind food into a pulpy cigar shaped wad ready for swallowing. Whiskers help a horse find and evaluate food (they help with distance, texture, temperature, shape and movement). A horse bases many decisions on what to eat and what to avoid based on whisker input.

**Esophagus:** The horse’s esophagus is a simple tube that takes food from the mouth to the stomach. A horse’s esophagus is roughly 1.5m in length. With such a far distance to travel food that isn’t properly broken down can get lodged in the horses throat and cause them to choke, this is why maintenance of a horse’s teeth is so important.

**Stomach:** Perhaps the most important part of the horse digestive system, a horse’s stomach is quite small and food is broken down by stomach acids very quickly. Horses have a large volume of stomach acid, so if they don’t have access to constant food they can suffer from ulcers and pain (which is why we should always feed our horses some hay before riding if grazing is low).

**Small Intestine:** Next on the horse digestive system tour we find the small intestine. It is 15-22m long and does the majority of the work. Nutrients are absorbed through the walls of the small intestine and deposited into the blood stream. Horses don’t have bacteria in their small intestine, so any toxins that are digested are carried directly to the blood stream. That is why feeding moldy hay or bad feed is big problem.

**Large Colon, Cecum & Small Colon:** Also known as the hind gut, the large colon makes up 62% of the digestive system and it is 7m long in total. Food can remain in this section of the digestive system for about seven hours. Here vitamins, fatty acids, fiber and some proteins will be absorbed. Whatever is left then moves to the small colon. By now most useful nutrients have been absorbed and whatever is left is waste. The main job of the small colon is to remove excess moisture and return it to the body. Waste, or what we know as manure, then moves to the rectum and out through the anus.

