

No Tricks, Just Treats



Treats, Taste, Together – Understanding How Horses Eat and Explores

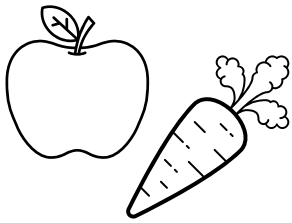
This lesson explores how and why we give treats, what types of treats are good all while helping equestrians understand how horses use their senses, especially smell and taste.

Through interactive activities, discussions, and hands-on demonstrations, equestrians will discover how horses experience food differently from humans, how to safely offer treats, and how to make smart treat choices for individual horse needs.

Participants engage their senses in fun experiments like “Smell Like a Horse” and “Eating Like a Horse” to better understand equine behavior and perspective, building empathy and safer handling skills.

Objectives:

- Understand the Purpose of Treats
- Recognize why and when treats are used—reward, trust-building, enrichment, or training—and when they may not be appropriate.
- Explore the Horse’s Senses
- Learn how horses use smell and taste to find and identify food, the role of the vomeronasal organ, and how their chewing differs from humans.
- Make Safe Treat Choices
- Identify safe and unsafe treats, read labels carefully, and consider each horse’s individual needs (age, health, dental, or metabolic).
- Demonstrate Safe Treat-Giving
- Practice proper hand-feeding techniques and use buckets or pans when more space or structure is needed.
- Build Empathy and Connection
- Experience what it’s like to eat without hands or full vision and reflect on how this perspective deepens understanding and improves safety.



No Tricks, Just Treats



Why Treats?

Horse treats are useful tools for positive reinforcement, motivation, confidence-building, and emotional connection, provided they are delivered with good timing, clear criteria, and attention to equine manners. In structured training, they transform learning into a cooperative process rather than a compliance-based task.

1. Reward for Good Behavior

- Helps reinforce manners, patience, or a job well done.
- Can promote better focus and motivation

2. To Build Trust and Connection

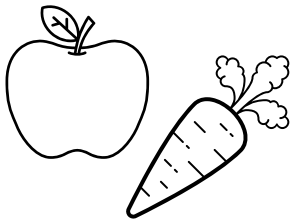
- When used calmly and consistently, treats can promote trust and cooperation between horse and handler. They can help shy, fearful, or newly rehomed horses gain confidence around people. This food-based reward system mirrors cooperative exchanges seen in equine social behavior, supporting gentle communication.
- Treats can increase training clarity by marking the exact behavior being rewarded, especially when paired with clicker training or verbal markers.
- They can also guide horses to stay relaxed in stressful situations.
- Research comparing treat rewards to tactile rewards (such as patting or scratching) found horses clearly preferred treats over human touch in training contexts.

3. As Enrichment or Fun

- Hiding treats in hay or slow feeders encourages natural foraging.
- Treat puzzles
- Scent work

Discussion prompts:

- “What’s a good time to give a treat?”
- “When might it not be a good idea?”



No Tricks, Just Treats



Have you ever walked into a kitchen with freshly baked cookies? What about popcorn popping? We can often smell these treats before we see them.

Let's explore what a horse's nose has to do with treats!

Sense of Smell

Horses Smell the World Differently Than We Do!"

Their noses help them find food, make friends, stay safe, and learn about everything around them.

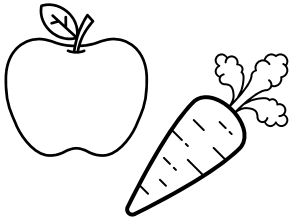
Smell Like a Horse

ACTIVITY

- **Set up small opaque containers or cups with various smells (safe and familiar) out of sight from your equestrians:**
 - Ex: Carrots, peppermint, hay, horse feed, horse treats, leather, grass, horse poop, etc,
- **Have kids close their eyes and try to identify the different smells.**
 - Prompt with questions: "Was it hard or easy to tell what it was?" "Is it something you would eat?" "Do you think a horse would eat it?"

Explanation:

Horses have way bigger noses and more smell detectors in their noses than we do! They can almost smell as good as dogs! They can smell things far away, know who's nearby, and even sense how another horse or person might be feeling based on there smells. When it comes to food and treats horses use their smell before they take a bite. Their nose helps them figure out if something smells tasty or if it's spoiled or just strange.



No Tricks, Just Treats



The Horse's Nose

See Olfactory Handout Included

- **Nostrils** – bring in smells
- **Nasal passages** – lots of folds to trap scents
- **Vomeronasal organ** – helps find special smells like pheromones

Have them try say “voh-meh-ro-NAY-sul” with you !

Question:

Ask if anyone has had them see a horse curl its upper lip up “like they are smiling”

Show flehmen response poster included

That’s called the **flehmen response** (say it like *flay-men*).

It might look silly, but the horse is actually using a special sense of smell! When they do this, they pull scents into a part of their nose called the **vomeronasal organ** (or **VNO** for short). This helps them smell things we can’t - like other horses’ scents or clues about what’s happening around them. Sometimes if a horse is smelling something new that they don’t recognize they may do this as well!

So the next time you see a horse making that funny face, remember - they’re not just being goofy, they’re doing some serious sniffing!

Flehman Response

A horse curls its upper lip and lifts its head to “smell” more deeply using a special organ called the vomeronasal organ (VNO)



- Neck stretched, head raised
- Upper lip curled back
- Teeth and gums sometimes visible
- Brief pause while the horse inhales

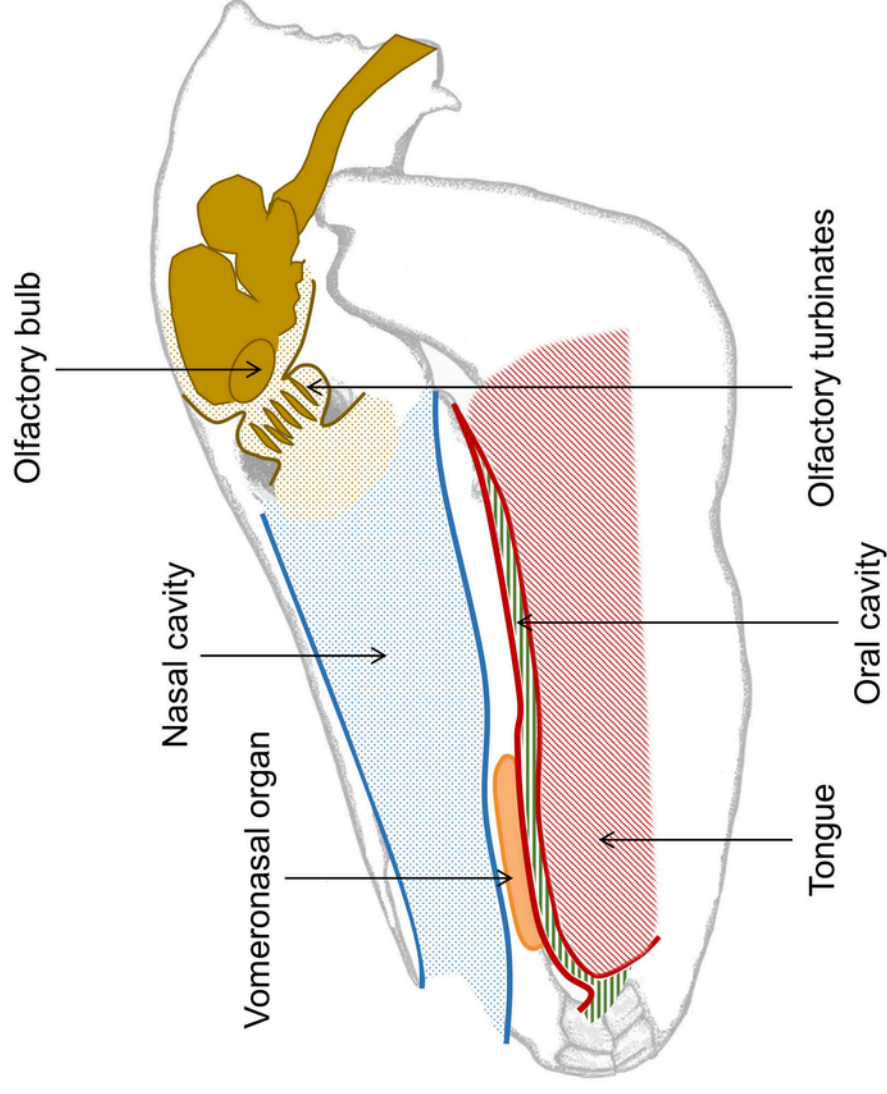
Super sniffing helps horses:

- Check for friends or mates
- Identify strong or new smells



When a horse breathes, its nasal passages are open, but when it swallows, they close. While breathing, the mouth is mostly sealed from the esophagus, so the tongue takes up most of the space in the mouth.

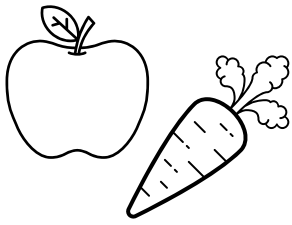
The olfactory turbinates in the nose hold the sensory cells that detect smells. These cells send information to the olfactory bulbs in the front of the brain. Together, all these parts form the first part of the horse's sense of smell.



Fun Facts

Horses can smell 10 times better than humans, helping them find food, friends, and detect danger.

Horses can recognize foods, people and other horses by scent, even after months apart.



No Tricks, Just Treats

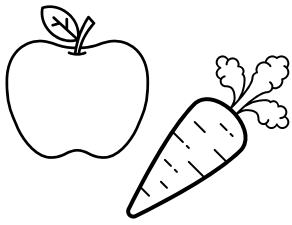


Tasty Treasure Hunt ACTIVITY

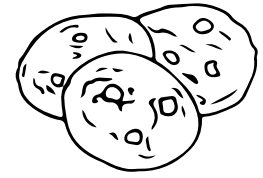
Let's watch our horse's noses at work!

Hide scent clues around a stall for your horse to explore!

- **Hide various objects both edible and non-edible in a safe space with few distractions.** I find it works best if you use clean buckets with a small towel overtop.
 - Example of edible ideas: Feed, carrots, apple slices, bananas, hay etc)
 - Examples of non-edible ideas: pair of boots, a lead rope, horseshow ribbon, a halter
- Set a horse free in the area of the buckets and observe the horse using their nose to explore.
- **Observe the horse:**
 - What did they do when they found a bucket with an edible item?
 - How did they explore the bucket with the inedible items? Why do you think they did?
 - Have you ever had a horse nose you? What are some reasons why they might do that?



No Tricks, Just Treats



Horse Sense of Taste

Horses can taste sweet, salty, sour, and bitter.

Just like people, horses have taste buds that help them tell if something tastes good or bad.

They usually like sweet and salty flavors best and don't like bitter or sour ones. Horses have about 25,000 taste buds.

That's more than people (we have around 9,000).

Most of their taste buds are on their tongue and the roof of their mouth.

Taste helps them choose what to eat.

Horses use taste (and smell) to find plants that are safe and avoid poisonous ones.

Sweet foods are usually a favorite treat - just like us!

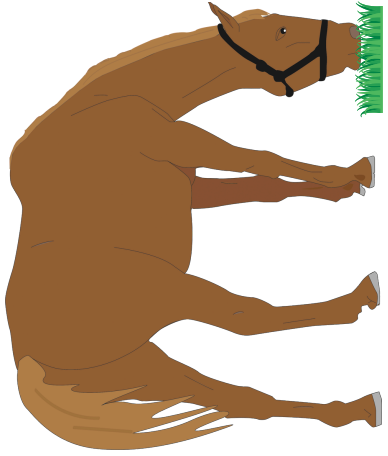
That's why those flavors are used in horse treats and grain - but too much sugar isn't good for them.

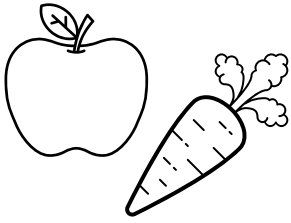
Horses remember tastes and smells of things they like (and ones they don't).

This can sometimes make it challenging for a horse to take medicine. If a horse eats something that tastes bad or makes them feel sick, they'll remember and avoid it later. But if it tastes good and makes them feel happy, they'll want it again.

Who had the best sense of smell?

Draw a line to give the awards!





No Tricks, Just Treats



Give Me The Good Treats!

ACTIVITY - See Handout - Safe food for horses

Carrots - good fiber, lower sugar

Rotten produce - spoiled or molding anything can cause colic, neurological problems, or death

Apple - good fiber and sweet though its best to cut them to prevent choke

Meat - Horses are strict herbivores — their digestive systems can't process animal protein or fat properly. Feeding meat can cause severe digestive upset or illness.

Raw potato - Contains solanine, a toxic compound that can cause colic or neurological issues. Cooked potato (without butter/salt) loses solanine but still not recommended. Sweet potato however are one of the few root vegetables horses can have. Sweet potatoes can be fed raw or cooked but higher potassium and sugars so avoid with EMS, PPID or HYPP.

Cucumber - Safe, low in sugar, high in water — a refreshing, hydrating treat, especially in hot weather.

Pumpkin - Plain pumpkin (flesh and seeds) is safe and nutritious just watch for moldy pumpkins.

Sunflower seeds - Black oil sunflower seeds are sometimes added to feed for coat shine. Safe in small amounts, but high in fat — don't overfeed.

Avocado - All parts (fruit, pit, leaves, bark) contain persin, which is toxic to horses and can cause colic, heart damage, or respiratory distress.

Banana - Good source of potassium (avoid for horses with HYPP). Can even feed with peel on (if clean and pesticide-free).

Sliced Celery - Safe, low-calorie, low sugar and high in fiber option. A good crunchy option

Chocolate - Contains theobromine and caffeine, both toxic to horses. Even small amounts can affect the heart and nervous system, and it's banned in competition horses

Peanuts - while safe, stick to human grade and properly stored peanuts because of the risk of mold/aflatoxins

Mellon - (watermelon, cantaloupe, honeydew) Safe, sweet, hydrating. Horses can even eat the rind

Grapes - Naturally sweet, use in moderation.

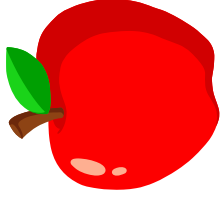
Circle the foods that are safe for horses to eat



Carrot



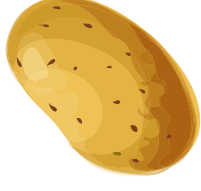
Rotten produce



Apple



Meat



Raw potato



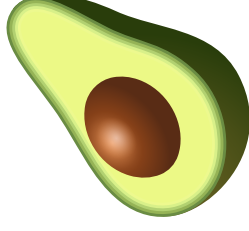
Cucumber



Pumpkin



Sunflower Seeds



Avacado



Banana



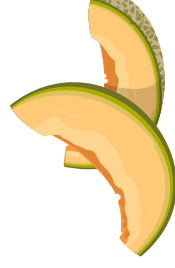
Sliced Celery



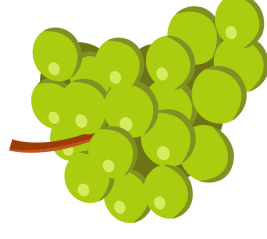
Chocolate



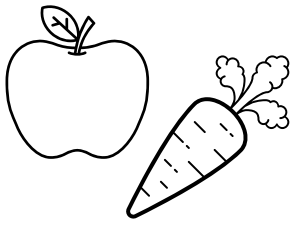
Peanuts



Mellon



Grapes



No Tricks, Just Treats



Give Me The Good Treats!

ACTIVITY - Evaluating Packaged Treats - See Handout

Packaged treats can be a great because they tend to keep a longer, however before you pass out the candy, take a look at the ingredients and decide what treats are best suited for your horse based on their health, size, workload etc.

When giving high frequency of treats - pelleted forage can be a great choice!

Notes to Consider that might influence treat selection

- **Equine metabolic syndrome and PPID/Cushings:** These horses require a low starch and sugar diet to help manage their insulin levels. High sugar or starch treats, such as those containing molasses or grains, not recommended for these horses.
- **Obesity:** Obese horses require a restricted diet to encourage weight loss are best to receive only low calorie treats and may have stricter guidelines on the amount and frequency of treats given.
- **Hyperkalemic periodic paralysis / HYPP:** Horses with this muscle disease are very sensitive to potassium levels in their diet. High-potassium treats, such as bananas and cantaloupe, are not suitable for these horses.
- **Dental issues:** Horses with dental disease and older horses with poor dentition often cannot chew treats thoroughly, meaning that hard or crunchy treats pose a higher risk of choke. Softer and smaller treats tend to be more appropriate for these horses.

Look at the Ingredients of Treat Bags

They are listed in order from most abundant to least

Forage/fiber Heavy Beet pulp, Alfalfa, etc.

- Easiest for a horse to chew and digest
- More fiber and nutritional value

Being aware of the base is especially important to consider for horse who have sensitive stomachs such as colic, ulcers, and fecal water syndrome

Grain Heavy Oats, Corn, Soy, Wheat,

- Filler with little nutritional value
- Out of grains oats are the most digestible choice.

Molasses, Sugar, Corn Syrup

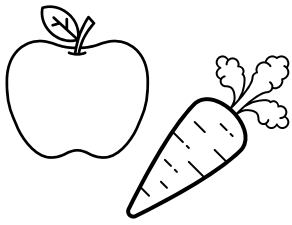
- Offers little nutritional value and acts more as a filler

Being aware of the sweetener is especially important to consider for horse who have metabolic concerns like PPID, EMS or genetic variations like HYPP

Fruit Based Sweeteners

- Tend to have a lower glycemic index for a slower blood sugar changes

- Artificial dyes - don't add nutritional value or make it more appetizing to your horse
- Expiration dates and packaging - make sure the packaging and storage prevents early spoiling
- Treat size - Is the treat a good size, will it expand and become a choke risk
- Top preferred horse flavors: Carrot, Peppermint, Banana, Cherry, Fenugreek, Cumin, Rosemary, Oregano



No Tricks, Just Treats



Eating Like a Horse!

Horse's can't see what they are eating!!

ACTIVITY

Objective:

Demonstrate how horses rely on senses other than sight and can't manipulate food with hands, highlighting how they explore and eat using only their nose and mouths.

Materials:

- Paper plates
- Cheerios (or small, safe snacks)
- Blindfolds

Instructions:

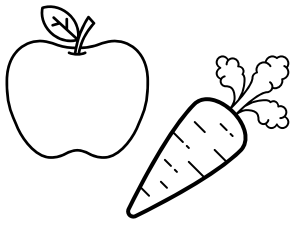
1. Blindfold each participant
2. Place the plate in front of them with a small handful of Cheerios on it
3. **Challenge:** Participants must eat all the Cheerios without using their hands to touch the plate or move the food.
4. Encourage them to rely on smell, feel and mouth coordination—just like horses.
5. For extra fun - ask if they can chew like a horse! - SEE HANDOUT

Reflection / Discussion:

- How did it feel to navigate food without sight or hands?
- Which senses became most important?
- How does this compare to a horse's natural way of exploring and eating?
- What strategies did you develop to succeed—similar to how horses adapt to their environment?

Eating Like a Horse

Discuss the horse's mouth and how they chew compared to humans - SEE HANDOUT



No Tricks, Just Treats



Eating Like a Horse!

Horse's can't see what they are eating!!

ACTIVITY

Objective:

Demonstrate how horses rely on senses other than sight and can't manipulate food with hands, highlighting how they explore and eat using only their nose and mouths.

Materials:

- Paper plates
- Cheerios (or small, safe snacks)
- Blindfolds

Instructions:

1. Blindfold each participant
2. Place the plate in front of them with a small handful of Cheerios on it
3. **Challenge:** Participants must eat all the Cheerios without using their hands to touch the plate or move the food.
4. Encourage them to rely on smell, feel and mouth coordination—just like horses.
5. For extra fun - ask if they can chew like a horse! - SEE HANDOUT

Reflection / Discussion:

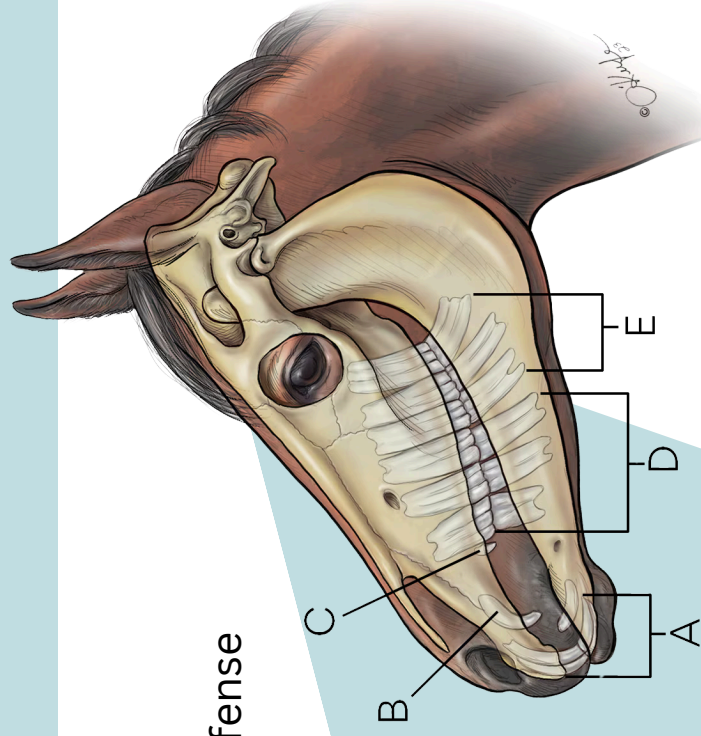
- How did it feel to navigate food without sight or hands?
- Which senses became most important?
- How does this compare to a horse's natural way of exploring and eating?
- What strategies did you develop to succeed—similar to how horses adapt to their environment?

Eating Like a Horse

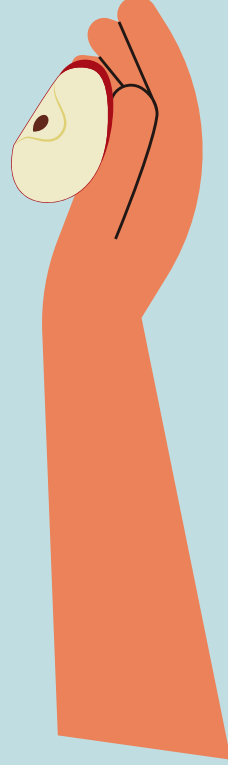
Discuss the horse's mouth and how they chew compared to humans - SEE HANDOUT

Understanding The Horse's Bite

- A. Incisors - Grab and tear
- B. Canine - Believed to be for self defense
- C. Wolf teeth - Believed to be evolutionary remnants



Horses can not see what they are biting!



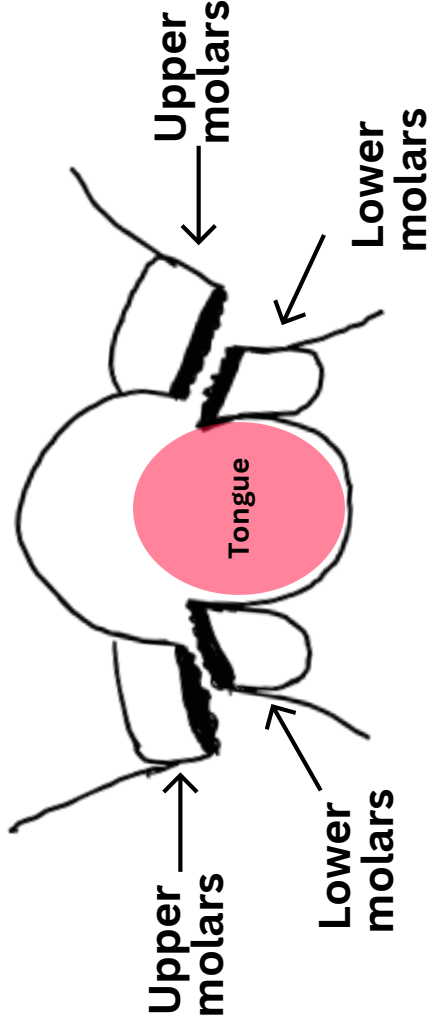
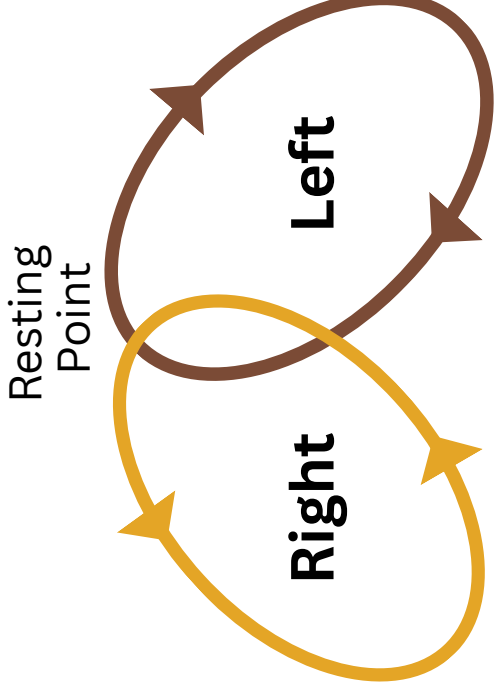
They use their sense of smell and their whiskers to feel to make a guess

D. Premolars & E. Molars

Used for sheering with a sideways motion. The wide, flat and grooved surfaces that crush and pulverize forage into a fine mash before the horse swallows.

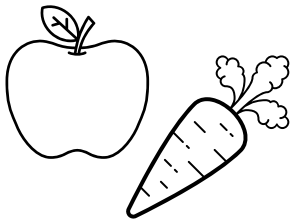
Chewing Like A Horse

- Mastication - is the chewing of food and the first part of digestion.
- Chewing increases saliva production (and bicarbonate) which helps buffer the stomach and reduce the risk of ulcers.

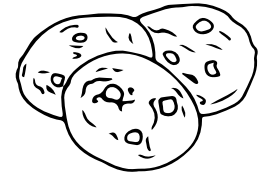


Chew Motion

- Horses use a sheering/sideways motion to grind and shred fibrous forage into smaller pieces.
- Horses only chew on one side of their mouth at a time. Either the left or the right. The jaw moves in an angled oval motion



No Tricks, Just Treats



Treat Making ACTIVITY

SEE HANDOUT - No Bake Horse Treats

While treats are chilling, practice feeding a treat below!

Feeding A Treat

How to Give Treats

Demonstrate:

1. Flat-Hand Rule:

- **Keep fingers flat, thumb tucked, and palm open.**
- **Let the horse gently take the treat from your palm.**

2. Bucket, Pan or Frisbee Option:

- **Simply place the treat in the container for feeding**
- **Safer for pushy or mouthy horses**
- **Good option for those who are fearful**
- **Helps prevent hand searching habits**

Practice Activity:

Use another humans or a stuffed horse to role play.

- **Practice the flat-hand position.**
- **Walk through offering a treat safely.**
- **Role-play what to do if a horse gets pushy.**
- **Discuss any treat rules at your barn**

No Bake Horse Treats



Ingredients:

- 2 cups oats
- 1 cup unsweetened applesauce
- 1/2 cup molasses or honey
- One grated carrot or apple
- 1/4 cup flaxseed or chia seeds
- 1/4 cup water

Supplies:

- Large mixing bowl
- Measuring cup
- Grater
- Plate or tray

Yields: 14 treats

Prep time: 15 mins

Refrigerate: 30 mins

Directions:

1. Grate the carrot or apple finely. Leave the peel on for extra nutrients.
2. In a large mixing bowl, combine the oats and the flaxseed or chia seeds. Stir well.
3. Pour the unsweetened applesauce and molasses or honey over the mixture. The sweet, sticky ingredients will allow the cookies to stick into shape.
4. Add the grated carrot or apple to the bowl. Stir again, using a wooden spoon or your hands. The mixture should be sticky but hold together when pressed. If it's too dry, add a little water, one tablespoon at a time, until the mixture holds together well.
5. Take small handfuls of the mixture and roll it into the size of golf balls.
6. Place the formed cookies on a baking sheet or plate. Since these are no-bake cookies, you don't need to worry about spacing them out too much.
7. Optional: Allow the cookies to sit in the refrigerator for about 30 minutes. This will help them firm up and hold their shape. Once the cookies are firm, they're ready to eat!