

Three Barriers

Every year I can count on a half dozen calls from clients whose horses have got into the grain when no one was in the barn. You may come home from a dinner out and find your horse in the grain room, having his own dinner out.

You surprise your horse, which until your arrival had his head deep in a bag of sweet feed. You yell, and it's funny how they know they've done something wrong and scramble back to their stall.

Even worse is the morning discovery. You find that one of the horses has gotten out of its stall. Because he enjoys company he has let a couple of his friends out as well so they could all have an extra meal together.

Sometimes the horse makes such a mess that it's impossible to tell how much grain is missing. That raises two big questions: how much did he eat, and is he going to get sick. If a horse eats somewhere between two and twenty times what he should be getting you can be sure that he will at the very least have a good belly ache. Most grain is carbohydrate rich and too much can cause laminitis which may become founder, a seriously crippling problem of the feet.

If you discover that one of your horses has gotten that extra meal, try to remember how much grain was there before the incident. Then, if you can, try to determine when the horse got into the grain. Those are two questions that your vet will ask you when you call. Sometimes mineral oil by stomach tube and injectables given in time will prevent complete absorption of the grain excess and its effects.

You can prevent all this from happening at all by using what I call the 3 barrier system to prevent unwanted equine visitors to the grain room.

The first barrier is the horse's own stall door. Make sure that the door is properly closed before you leave. Most barn door hardware has a hole to slip a snap through to foil the horse that delights in opening doors. Some "Houdini" horses will spend hours trying to get the door open. Take that extra few seconds to insure that they can't.

The second barrier is the door to the grain room. All of the same precautions apply.

If your horse is really determined (or if someone has been sloppy about securing doors) and does gain access to the grain room, I would make sure that there is a third barrier. Put your unopened bags of grain into an old chest type freezer or some large chest that also has a snap or arrangement that a horse can't figure out. If your pen grain is in a 5 gallon bucket make sure that the lid can be screwed on so that if tipped over and rolled, it won't open. Never, ever leave open or unopened bags in a grain or tack room without that third barrier of protection.

Do your horses a favor. As you are leaving the barn each time, ask yourself, "Are my 3 barriers up?", and run through them mentally. Then leave with peace of mind.

I have treated many horses for grain overload. I have never done so at a farm that religiously practices the three barrier method. It's just a part of being a responsible horse owner.