

FECAL WATER SYNDROME:

Beyond the Mess - A Path to Recovery



WHAT CAUSES FECAL WATER?

Fecal water syndrome is caused by disruptions in the horse's hindgut function. This condition is becoming increasingly common in modern horses, much like other lifestyle-related health issues.

What Happens in the Hindgut?

The horse's hindgut performs two vital functions: beneficial microorganisms break down complex carbohydrates (plant fibers) while the intestinal wall absorbs water and nutrients from digested feed. Normally, muscular contractions shape this processed material into the familiar rounded droppings we expect to see.

With fecal water syndrome, normal manure droppings are accompanied by liquid seepage. This can range from just a few drops to significant amounts of brown fluid. Some horses show symptoms only during stressful situations, while others experience continuous drainage. The condition can affect any breed or age of horse.

WHAT'S HAPPENING WHEN FECAL WATER OCCURS?

A healthy horse's hindgut maintains a delicate pH balance, typically between 6.8 and 7.2 - right in the neutral zone. This precise balance is crucial for proper digestive function.

Acidic pH Triggers Inflammation

A drop in hindgut pH creates a hostile, acidic environment that kills off essential gut bacteria. The gut lining itself is vulnerable to these acidic conditions - it needs a neutral environment to maintain its protective barrier. As inflammation (colitis) develops, the tight seals between intestinal cells begin to fail, creating tiny gaps in this normally solid wall. This "leaky gut" allows substances to slip through the damaged barrier in ways that nature never intended.

A Self-Perpetuating Cycle

In horses with fecal water syndrome, the gut first absorbs fluid from the intestinal space, separating it from solid matter (unlike in diarrhea). However, this fluid then seeps back into the gut through microscopic gaps in the compromised intestinal wall. The typically acidic conditions in affected horses' hindguts turn this seepage acidic as well, leading to further inflammation and more barrier damage. This creates a troubling cycle: free fecal water promotes conditions that generate more free fecal water. Even horses that only show symptoms during stressful times aren't in the clear - their gut balance is already compromised, and even slight changes in gut motility or blood flow can trigger an episode.

What Lowers the Hindgut's pH?

Acidic feeds like haylage or the introduction of lactic acid bacteria into the digestive system (e.g. from haylage, yogurt, or products containing "Lacto-" or "Bifidus" cultures) create an acidic environment in the equine hindgut. Lactic acid bacteria aren't part of a horse's natural hindgut microbiome, as recent studies in feral horses show. While these bacteria thrive at pH levels below 6, such acidity is far too low for the horse's digestive system.

Lactic Acid Bacteria Create Hindgut Dysbiosis

Unlike beneficial gut bacteria, lactic acid bacteria don't break down complex plant fibers. Instead, they ferment proteins and soluble carbohydrates, producing lactic acid waste rather than usable energy. This creates a downward spiral: the acidic environment helps these bacteria thrive while killing off beneficial gut microbes. While horses can absorb and process lactic acid, converting it to usable sugar in the liver requires precious oxygen resources. For horses, lactic acid is essentially a waste product, not a nutrient, and excessive production and absorption in the gut should be avoided.





Horses should never face periods of forced fasting - they need continuous access to forage to maintain gut health.

Cellulose Over Starch: Understanding Gut Health

When horses consume concentrates, it affects their hindgut pH in two ways: processed grains encourage lactic acid bacteria growth in the stomach, which then travel with feed to the hindgut. Unprocessed grains like barley or corn deliver raw starch directly to the hindgut, providing a feast for these harmful bacteria. The horse's natural gut microbes, however, aren't designed to handle starch - they thrive on cellulose. Even seemingly healthy ingredients rich in pectins - like apple pomace, beet pulp, or carrots - can throw off this balance by promoting acid-producing organisms that should remain minimal in a healthy gut.

Stress: A Key Trigger

Stress can trigger free fecal water episodes, but chronic stress is especially concerning. This might stem from external sources like herd conflicts or difficult stablemates, or internal issues like chronic pain or gastric ulcers. If your horse only shows fecal water symptoms during stressful situations, it's often a red flag for underlying gastric issues.

ASSESSING GUT HEALTH: DIAGNOSTIC OPTIONS

→ pH Testing

You can measure your horse's manure pH using a simple method: Press fresh manure through a potato ricer and test the liquid with a pH meter (available from aquarium supplies).

6.8–7.2 = Normal range
Below 6.5 = Acidic
Below 6.2 = Severely acidic

→ Indican Testing

Specialized labs like www.vetscreen.de can check your horse's urine for indican levels - an early warning sign of gut fermentation issues. Since this test can detect digestive problems before free fecal water becomes visible, it allows for early intervention when treatment is most effective.

Indican Level Guide:

0 = Normal
1 = Mild fermentation issues
2–4 = Severe, often chronic hindgut dysbiosis



Please contact us before starting any therapy. We will be happy to connect you with a qualified therapist from the Sanoanimal network who can create an individualized treatment plan for your horse: office@sanoanimal.com.

MANAGING FECAL WATER: FIRST STEPS

The first priority should be reviewing and adjusting your horse's diet. Success depends on ensuring constant access to good quality hay while eliminating feeds that disturb the natural gut microbiome. For a tailored treatment plan that addresses your horse's specific needs, consult a qualified therapist at office@sanoanimal.com.

Avoid Haylage, Starch, And Pectins

Certain feeds can throw off your horse's delicate gut balance. Fermented feeds like haylage are particularly problematic, but so are foods rich in pectins - including fresh grass, carrots, and apples. Even commercial feeds can cause issues, especially those containing grains, molasses, beet pulp, or apple pomace.

Skip The Chaff

Don't be fooled by feed products marketing chaff (those small green stems) as a healthy, low-calorie option for your horse. While it may sound great, these fibers can seriously disrupt digestion by slowing gut movement. This allows feed to sit and ferment in the hindgut for up to a week, potentially leading to severe hindgut dysbiosis.

Choose Medications Carefully

Keep in mind that medications, including dewormers, also affect the hindgut microbiome. Only deworm based on positive fecal tests, not "just in case".

Quality Hay is Key

Horses with fecal water must have unlimited access to fresh, mould-free hay. Feed approximately 2-3 kg of hay per 100 kg body weight. To prevent weight gain, consider both your hay's nutritional content and use slow feeders to regulate intake.

Multiple Small Meals

Continuous access to forage is crucial, as human-imposed feeding breaks can disrupt your horse's gut microbiome and trigger gastric ulcers. When regular hay isn't always available, offer alternative forage nibbling like straw, branches, leaves, or similar roughage. Minimize concentrate feeds and split them into several small portions throughout the day. For horses with digestive sensitivities, **OKAPI Sainfoin** makes an ideal grain-free concentrate feed.

Gut Restoration

OKAPI ColoProtect forte works both as an absorbent and stabilizer for the gut environment and pH levels. Its beta-glucan component forms a protective layer over irritated intestinal mucosa, providing anti-inflammatory effects. For severe fecal water, we recommend supplementing with **OKAPI psyllium husks/seeds** or **OKAPI Helianthus**, which act like a sponge to absorb excess fluid and break the cycle



Quality hay is the cornerstone of healthy horse nutrition.

of fecal water acidification-fecal water. In therapy-resistant horses that don't respond to gut restoration, gastric ulcers or stress are often the underlying cause. In such cases, we recommend a course of **OKAPI GasterCare forte**. In those cases also seek advice from a well-trained therapist to identify and address root causes while eliminating potential stress triggers.

Acid Balance and Detoxification

Horses suffering from severe fecal water need herbal support for detoxification even after gut restoration. A 6-8 week course of **OKAPI Prodic** and **OKAPI Zinc** is recommended to restore acid balance. Additionally, **OKAPI Spirulina** (available as powder or pellets) can support metabolic detoxification. A proven approach alternates between **OKAPI Detox Herbs**, **OKAPI Bitter Herbs**, and **OKAPI Immune Herbs** every two weeks. For horses with elevated indican levels, supplementing with **OKAPI HeparkPU forte** may be beneficial. However, consult your therapist before adding these supplements, to prevent overdosing. As a long-term alternative for your horses' feed bucket, we recommend **OKAPI Four Seasons Feed** or **OKAPI RationBalancer**, that offer a healthy alternative to traditional concentrates.