

How Can My IR/Cushings Horse "Live Like a Horse"?



A frequent question/concern emerges with the newly diagnosed insulin resistant or Cushings horse: How can my horse enjoy life if he is not living like a horse? How can he have any quality of life if not allowed to graze? Will he have to be confined, locked away in lonely isolation while the other horses are out in the fields?

These are valid concerns, which need to be addressed: primarily with a paradigm shift.

Horses need a couple of things to be able to express their natural instincts and evolved way of life:

Movement.

Low energy food, taken in over the day, as opposed to meal fed.

Social interaction, preferably with horses, otherwise with goats, cattle, other equines, etc. Humans don't really cut the mustard, because they are not there enough.

So, let's take the idea of a horse needing to be out grazing 24/7, and look really closely at it. Yes, it can provide movement - but doesn't always. In

most pasture situations, the horse gets its head down, eats, moves around a little for water or to go to the poop pile, a little interaction with its pasture mates, and that's it. Wild horses move up to 25 or more miles daily. Modern pasture horses don't move even a tenth that much.

Hmmmm.... how about the low energy food? Again, modern pastures contain modern grasses which are anything but low energy. It would be great if we all lived on the Mongolian steppes, or pristine prairies, where the bulk of the grass is low sugar prairie grass - but prairie grass is not used in pastures because it IS (mostly) low sugar, and because it does not stand up to intense grazing and compaction. And even prairie grasses can be dangerously high in sugars at different times - the wild/free range horse is protected from that effect by their constant movement. Not much point in planting your pasture with prairie grass, unless you have a 10,000 acre pasture, and can keep your horses moving.

The social interaction - yes, if the horse is out on pasture with buddies, that aspect is covered.

Does a horse NEED grass to be a horse? No - a horse needs forage. It doesn't have to be fresh grass. Wild horses in the desert do quite well on dried up wispy bits of whatever they can find.

Would a horse rather have fresh grass that tastes like candy? Absolutely. But here, you have to ask yourself if it is worth the agony of laminitis. I think that is a no-brainer. If I were offered a large chocolate bar (which I love), but it went along with having someone strike my foot with a sledgehammer (which is only a fraction of the pain of laminitis), I would not eat the chocolate bar. If you had a diabetic child, you would not allow that child to live on a diet of sugary food, because sure as shooting, that would result in blood sludging, blindness, and early death. We are the stewards of our horses, and to allow an IR horse to graze merely because we think he should is irresponsible, and actually cruel.

So, let's think outside of the green pasture box, and address the needs of the horse (as opposed to the needs of the human).

Movement: this can be provided nicely on a dry lot, and even better on a Paddock Paradise track system, where there is no grass on the track. That is pretty easy if your horse lives at home with you, but can be a little more difficult in a boarding situation. However, I would venture to suggest that in most boarding situations there are fat horses who would benefit from a Paddock Paradise set-up. If those horse owners were to get together, and offer to set up such a system, the barn owner might agree.



Photo of Joe & Rocky-Courtesy of Kathleen Gustafson

If you are in a boarding situation where turn-out is a choice between small dry lot, and big pasture, then there are still a couple of options: You can have your horse turned out with a muzzle, so he can't get any grass. Horses can still drink with a muzzle in place. Of course, your horse needs to come into the dry lot every 6 hours or so to have a bite to eat. Alternatively, your horse can be in the dry lot with a buddy, and you will have to provide extra exercise for the horse yourself. This is not easy, or ideal, but it is still 1,000% kinder than allowing your horse to get laminitis.

One more note on movement: it is a common scenario for a hard-working, IR prone horse, such as an Arabian endurance horse, to be fine on pasture - until they retire. Then, without that constant physical exercise, their genetic propensity towards IR kicks in, they get fat, and Boom!: laminitis.

Providing low sugar forage on a continuing basis can be addressed by the use of various slow feeding devices -as simple and inexpensive as small mesh hay nets, hung around the dry lot, to as expensive and complicated as large slow feeder fixtures. There are tons of good ideas on the EC Horsekeeping group (<https://ecir.groups.io/g/Horsekeeping>), and on the Paddock Paradise wikki (<http://paddockparadise.wetpaint.com/>) It can take some experimentation to get just the right combination of nets etc to deal with some

of the speed-eating equines in our care, but it can be done.

So, here is my take on the horse-keeping on pasture paradigm: (this is for IR /Cushings horses. Those owners with non-IR/Cushings horses can certainly allow their horses to graze - but not get fat-and be sure to introduce them to lush/growing pasture very gradually.)

Horses on large pasture: Social interaction --yes. Food 24/7 -- yes. Movement --maybe. Appropriate food for health?---BZZZT! Minus ten!



Photo of Asher- Courtesy of Mandy Woods

Horses in a large drylot, paddock paradise, or pasture with a muzzle: Social interaction---yes. Food 24/7 --- yes, with slow feeders. Movement --- maybe - more on the track system. Appropriate food for health?----YES!!!!

It definitely takes a little more thought and organization to keep a horse off grass, than it does to turn a horse out into a pasture and allow it to eat itself to death. However, many, many horse owners have found that once you get your head around it, the actual time and work involved seems really minimal - especially when they look out there and see those lean, trim, fit, healthy,

happy horses.

That's my take on the IR/Cushings lifestyle.

Jaini, Merlin, Maggie, Gypsy

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EC moderator

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