

### Treated Straw Products

Treated straw products consist of chopped straw that is sometimes mixed with other bedding materials. Essential oils are also sometimes added. This type of bedding tends to be more consistent in quality than conventional straw. Treated straw bedding comes in wrapped bales that are easier to store than traditional straw bales, but this type of bedding can be more expensive than other types of straw.

### Wood Shavings

Wood shavings have been a popular horse bedding for many years, and are often used for horses that suffer from respiratory disease, or those that tend to eat other types of bedding. The quality of wood shavings varies greatly, particularly in respect of the dust content. Dust extracted shavings are the most popular as they are of a higher quality and have a low dust content. Low quality shavings, often a sawmill by-product, are not suitable for horse bedding as they can be contaminated with sharp splinters and other potentially dangerous waste. The brands of shaving with the largest flakes are usually produced from virgin wood and can have lower dust content. Wood shavings do provide excellent support for the horse's hooves as they compact inside them. Shavings are usually packed in polythene wrapped bales, making them easy to stack and store.



Photo courtesy of Grange Livery, Northampton

### Shredded Wood Fibre

Shredded wood fibre is specifically manufactured from selected recycled white wood, making it one of the 'greenest' bedding products available. This product is totally dust free and absorbent, which helps to keep the surface of the bed dry. It is less likely to move around, so may help to reduce the risk of injury when the horse gets up and lies down. The quality of shredded wood fibre is of a consistently high quality and it is widely available. Shredded wood fibre offers support to the hooves and is easy to manage with very little waste, so producing one of the smallest muck heaps.

### Flax and Hemp

Flax and hemp bedding materials are made from the chopped stems of flax and hemp plants. This bedding material has become increasingly popular in recent years and has a low dust content. This bedding can often be more expensive, which may limit its appeal. Instances of horses eating the bedding are rare but have been reported, so it is important to look out for this as flax and hemp are relatively indigestible. It is packaged in heavy duty plastic bags so can easily be stored.

### Paper

Paper is usually shredded and consists of a mix of newspaper, magazines and other unwanted printed matter, with varying absorbency. The key advantages of paper are that it is a dust-free and non-palatable bedding material. However, the long paper strips tend to be harder to muck out as they can stick together and become difficult to separate from the droppings. Bales usually come wrapped in polythene making them easy to store. Paper is one of the cheaper types of bedding, but a large number of bales may be needed to create a thick bed and ink can also stain a light coloured coat. When wet, paper can become less user-friendly and very soggy.

### Cardboard

Cardboard is usually shredded and is another dust-free bedding material. It can, however, move around the stable like paper, leaving bare patches when the horse gets up and lies down. Cardboard clumps together when wet, making removal of these patches easy, but it can be difficult to separate from droppings, which can be wasteful.

### Rubber Matting

Rubber matting has become commonplace as a partial alternative to bedding in stables. Although the matting is initially expensive, it should be viewed as a long-term investment.



Photo courtesy of Moulton College, Northampton

Rubber matting provides excellent support for the horse's hooves and limbs and minimises the risk of injury as it covers the concrete floor and provides better grip. Rubber flooring comes in separate mats that interlock, or it can come in a liquid that forms a seamless floor that does not have to be lifted for cleaning.

We strongly advise that a good layer of bedding material is added on top of the mats, as this will help soak up urine and contain droppings. Some

people choose to use rubber matting without any bedding, although we at the BHS do not endorse this practice. This management option can lead to wet floors, dirty rugs and horses. Many horses do not like to urinate on hard surfaces, so adding bedding will help prevent this problem.

Hygiene standards need to be high when using rubber matting. Mats will need to be uplifted and thoroughly cleaned underneath to prevent a build up of ammonia and dirty bedding material. Ideally, this should be performed a minimum of once per month, and more regularly during the hotter summer months.

Overall, rubber matting is easy to manage and although the initial cost is high, the amount of bedding used can be significantly reduced, saving time mucking out and reducing the size of the muckheap.

### Purchase of Bedding

Local feed merchants and country stores stock many different types of bedding and are often able to order in a particular product for a client. Bedding suppliers may deliver large amounts directly to individual yards or local stockists. Buying in bulk on large yards can help to reduce costs.

Straw is usually purchased from a local farmer, who will often deliver to your yard. Quality of straw and price per bale will vary between different suppliers.

Some livery yard clients may find that the yard owner provides bedding included in the cost of livery, or it is available for sale from them. This is often easier, but it can be difficult if you want to use a different product.

Useful leaflets available from BHS Welfare:

- Horse Respiratory Health
- Guidelines for the Keeping of Horses: Stable Sizes, Pasture and Fencing



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## ADVICE ON Bedding for Horses



# Bedding

Different types of bedding materials are used in stables to satisfy the needs of both the horse and the carer. The significant impact that poor quality bedding can have on the health and welfare of the horse, even those stabled for only very short periods of time, should not be underestimated. With an ever-increasing choice of different materials now available, consideration must be given to a number of factors.



Fresh, clean air is essential for the health of the horse and its carer. It is therefore extremely important that bedding materials are of a high quality so that dust is absent or only present at very low levels. Mould spores and dust, which are present in very poor quality bedding materials, are unacceptable and can result in a number of respiratory problems. We strongly recommend the use of dust and mould-free bedding for horses.

Bedding materials should allow easy, efficient removal of droppings, which should be done at frequent intervals. Urine should be allowed to drain freely to the base of the bed where it is absorbed and can be removed. Stable design is also important and will determine how efficient a bedding material is in terms of drainage and

absorption. Some stables have drainage channels, which will also assist with the effective removal of urine.

Bedding in the stable must provide support for the horse's hooves while standing and for the whole body when lying down. This is essential to prevent stable injuries such as capped hocks or elbows and to allow the horse to lie down and get up safely without slipping. Good, high banks and thick bedding will also help to alleviate injury if a horse becomes cast. Injuries are more likely to occur if the stable size is too small for the horse and if the surface of the floor does not offer adequate grip. Thick bedding with high banks may also help to block out draughts.

not toxic if eaten, and is not an irritant to the skin. Regular mucking out and cleaning of the whole stable environment is fundamental to the ongoing good health and welfare of the horse. There are a variety of mucking out systems available to choose from, each with their own advantages and disadvantages:

- Full muck-out – we strongly recommend that the stable is fully mucked out on a daily basis. This ensures that all fresh droppings and urine are removed from the stable. A full muck-out may take longer to complete but will provide the best

environment for the horse's health. It is important to remember to rotate banks to prevent them becoming mouldy and gathering dust.

- Part muck-out – this system is usually adopted when time is limited. For example, the droppings are removed daily during the week and then the stable is fully mucked out at weekends. It is important to add extra bedding as required throughout the week.



- Deep litter – this system is often used on yards with a large number of horses. Droppings are removed from the stable and fresh bedding added on top. It is important that beds do not become too deep and the stable should periodically be completely emptied and thoroughly cleaned. Although this system is the most economical time and cost wise, it is the least suitable for the horse's respiratory health and can cause other health problems too.

Research has confirmed a link between ammonia and respiratory problems in horses.

## Bedding Basics

There has never been a greater choice of bedding materials on the market and although there are similarities between many of them, they all have their advantages and disadvantages. Many of the new products benefit from superior research and technology.

There are a number of factors that should be considered for both the horse and the carer when choosing the bedding.

### Storage

When choosing the most suitable bedding material for horse and carer, storage needs to be taken into consideration. Products with a robust, waterproof packaging can often be

Decomposing urine and faeces cause ammonia to be produced and therefore it is present in the stable. Ammonia can cause respiratory health problems for the horse, highlighting the importance of good stable management. Horses kept on deep litter systems will be exposed to higher levels of ammonia compared with a horse that is fully mucked out daily.

The stabled horse's hooves should be picked out every day, but ideally twice a day as a matter of good practice. Dry, clean bedding also helps to eliminate the risk of thrush in the hoof. Thrush is a foul smelling bacterial infection which can be caused by horses standing in wet, dirty bedding. Again, good stable management will go a long way to prevent the infection.

Dusty or dirty bedding is a significant health risk and the advantages of dust free bedding cannot be overstated. Expecting staff to work with dusty or mouldy bedding materials is unacceptable as there is a potential health risk to humans too.

stored outside, or in a sheltered area. Unpackaged bedding, such as straw, needs to be stored in a cool, dry place such as a weatherproof barn, to prevent it from becoming mouldy, dusty and unusable. Consideration should also be given to storage security to help prevent the theft of bedding materials.

### Availability

The availability of certain types of bedding materials may be affected by the time of the year, the success of a harvest or the presence of suppliers in your area. This should be taken into account when choosing bedding material, as costs can increase when supplies are limited.

### Waste Removal

The majority of bedding materials are biodegradable; the only difference being the timescale in which each rots down. The method of waste removal may influence the choice of bedding material. For example, an increasing number of yards have to pay for the removal of muck



heaps, which makes the amount of waste important. There can be significant differences in the amount of waste produced from each product when mucking out. Horse manure is not suitable for spreading on equine pasture due to the risk of contamination with parasites, and it would also make the grass unpalatable. Further information on the storage and disposal of muckheaps is available from the Environment Agency, Defra and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency.

## Types of Bedding

### Straw

Straw is the most traditional bedding and has been used for centuries. There are three main types of straw available – wheat, barley and oat. Some horses will consume straw bedding, meaning that it is not an appropriate choice for all stables.

**Wheat Straw** is the most common type used. It makes a warm, comfortable bed that is easy to handle as well as allowing free drainage. Wheat straw is usually readily available although it does tend to be the dustiest straw.

**Barley Straw** is often the least expensive but is not always the most suitable for horses. The ears in the straw can be very prickly and may cause skin irritations.

**Oat Straw** is often of higher quality and more golden in colour; however, horses can be more inclined to eat this type of straw. It also tends to be more absorbent, which can make it become heavier to muck out.

### Advantages

- Straw is readily available, however the time of year may slightly increase the cost as harvest



Photo courtesy of Grange Livery, Northampton

- approaches and stocks are low
- It is a relatively cheap bedding material
- It is easy to use

### Disadvantages

- Straw can vary greatly in quality and may contain high levels of dust and mould spores
- Straw beds are rarely odourless and the muckheap can be both large and difficult to keep tidy
- Straw may not be a suitable type of bedding for horses or carers who are susceptible to respiratory disorders, or for horses who eat their bedding.