



Whether you're managing an easy keeper or safeguarding a laminitis-prone horse, a grazing muzzle is an indispensable tool.

By Christine Barakat

Few pieces of equipment are as inexpensive or easy to use as a grazing muzzle, but don't let its simplicity fool you. A muzzle can save a horse's life—reducing his risk of laminitis from overindulgence on rich pasture grass—or at least help keep him healthier by limiting his caloric intake.

When a horse wears one of these basket-like contraptions, he can breathe and drink normally but consumes only the blades of grass that poke through the muzzle's mesh straps. "Muzzles allow a horse all the benefits of turnout, from the exercise to the socialization to the fresh air, without the risks of consuming too much nutrient-rich grass," says Melinda Freckleton, DVM, a practitioner with Haymarket Veterinary Service in Haymarket, Virginia. Grazing can be further limited by covering the bottom hole with a thick cardboard disc.

"Any horse that doesn't need as

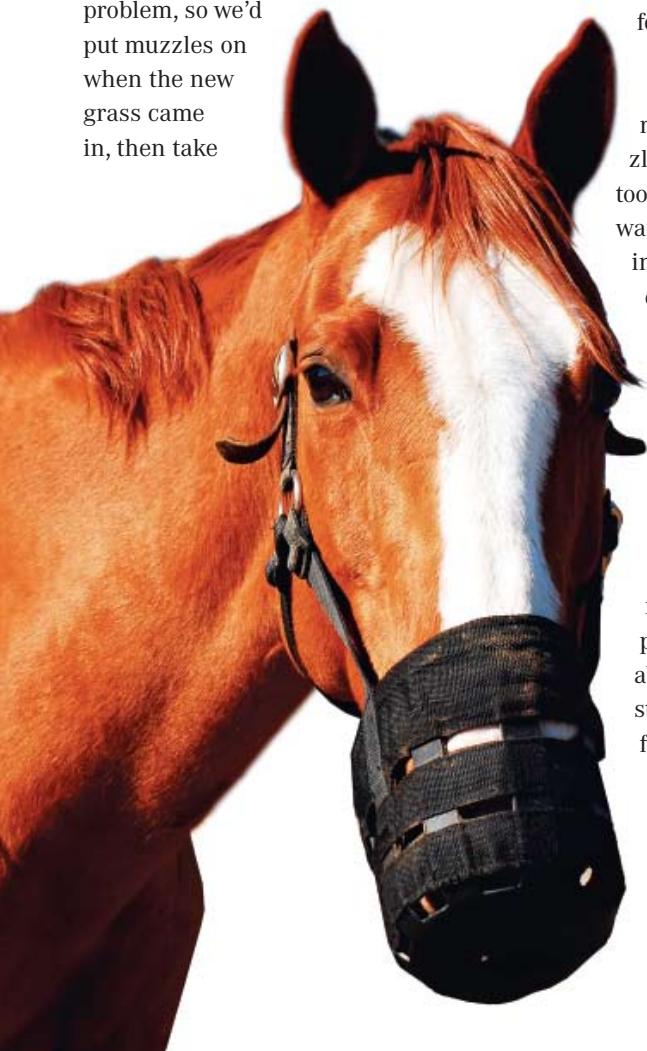
MUZZLED FOR MODERATION

PHOTOS BY LIZ ZANDER

“Experience has taught that grazing muzzles are advisable for some horses well beyond spring.”

much grass as is available to him” will benefit from a muzzle, says Freckleton. But this gear can be an especially important tool in managing horses with insulin⁰ resistance, Cushing’s⁰ syndrome or those who are simply more susceptible to laminitis, particularly when grass is lush in early spring.

In fact, she says, experience has taught her that grazing muzzles are advisable for some horses well beyond spring. “We used to think that only new grass was the problem, so we’d put muzzles on when the new grass came in, then take



them off when it got dry enough for the growth to slow. But as we learn more, we realize that it’s not that easy to predict when the grass can be risky,” says Freckleton. “I tell people that if they think maybe they should be muzzling, to go ahead and do it. And when you think the grass has died off enough to take it off, wait another week to be sure.”

In general, she advises paying closer attention to your local climate than to the calendar. “The grass greens up all the time here in Virginia. It can be mid-November and we are still muzzling. You can’t do it by the calendar alone. You have to make the call based on the current conditions.” Freckleton adds that she leaves off muzzles when a new horse is introduced to the herd and in other situations when the social order may be temporarily disrupted: “You’d be taking away one of a horse’s defenses if he gets into trouble.”

As with any gear, fit is important (see illustrations at right): To stay in place a muzzle needs to be snug, but if it’s too tight it may rub. Nonetheless, warns Freckleton, an enterprising horse may try to get rid of even a well-fitted muzzle: “I’ve seen horses rolling on the ground to pull them over their heads, and a few learn to hook muzzles on fences and pull back to break them,” she says. “One owner braided the horse’s mane around the crownpiece of the muzzle and that solved the problem. You can get creative about securing them, but you still need to have a breakaway feature for safety.”

For confirmed muzzle removers at risk of laminitis, a dry lot with no grass at all may be the only safe turn-out option.

How to fit a grazing muzzle

Melinda Freckleton, DVM, demonstrates how to check the fit of grazing muzzles on three horses: Dixie, Yogi and Jasmine.



This muzzle is far too large for Dixie.



A quick check of the stability of the basket shows it can be easily tipped forward...



The headstall hangs too loosely from Dixie's head and jaw.



...and backward. Dixie could displace or remove the muzzle by rubbing it on the ground.



Although adjusted to its largest setting, this horse-sized muzzle is too small for a draft cross named Yogi.



It's difficult to slip even one finger between the basket and Yogi's jaw. As the gelding chews, he will rub himself raw.



The headstall is too snug and there is no room between the bottom of the basket and Yogi's nose. Ideally, there would be at least an inch of clearance.



A better solution for Yogi is a muzzle that can be attached to a regular halter. Note: Because the gelding learned to unbuckle the halter by rubbing it on the ground, duct tape has been used to secure the crownpiece to the halter; this keeps the halter secure but will break away if Yogi gets caught up anywhere.

Just right



This muzzle fits Jasmine well.



The halter is neither too tight nor too loose around her poll or jaw.



There is an inch of clearance between the bottom of the muzzle and her nose.



The muzzle cannot be easily pulled forward or backward off of her nose.

For added comfort



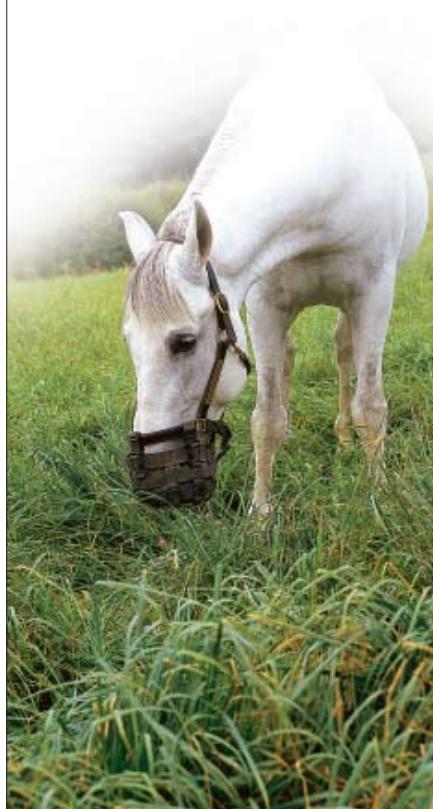
Even a well-fitting muzzle can rub the hair off bony portions of a horse's face, but a square of moleskin can prevent that.



Just peel off the adhesive backing and fold it around the front of the muzzle. 🐾

FOR THEIR OWN GOOD

“Every now and again I’ll meet owners who say they can’t muzzle their fat horses because they feel ‘mean’ doing it,” says Melinda Freckleton, DVM. “I tell them that a muzzle is much kinder than letting their horses get laminitis.”



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