

ask the experts...

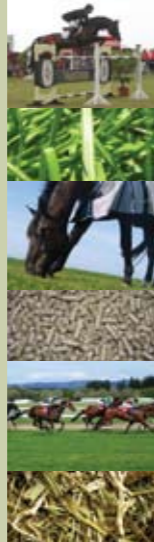
# Why does my horse eat dirt?

ask the experts...

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From Mariette van den Berg - Equine Nutritionist  
[www.mberg.com.au](http://www.mberg.com.au)

**W**ouldn't it be nice if we could just ask the horse? There appears to be a number of reasons why a horse eats dirt. Horses kept on eroded pastures may start eating dirt because there is no biomass left. They may do it out of boredom. In this case, the horse will show a pattern, i.e. repeat the behaviour with no obvious function (stereotypical behaviour). If this is not the case, horses can ingest dirt to self-supplement, self medicate and bind toxins or other substances. This behaviour may be normal, as observational studies in the wild have shown that a number of animals appear to self-medicate at certain times and in a number of different ways.

Horses may eat dirt because of lack of nutrients, in particular salt and other minerals and trace-minerals. Many horse owners provide a salt or mineral block in the pasture or paddock for horses to self-medicate, however, providing balanced levels of minerals and trace minerals in the feed may still be necessary, especially for horses with higher requirements (performance, breeding, ill health, aged etc) and are kept on poor pastures.

Ingesting healthy topsoil that contains beneficial micro-organisms can aid the horse's digestive system. Horses are hindgut fermenters. In the large intestine (caecum & large colon) horses house populations of bacteria, protozoa, fungi and other micro-organisms that breakdown structural carbohydrates (fibre) and produce products that the horse can absorb. Healthy soil can act like a probiotic for the horse.

Horses may also eat dirt to bind toxins, organic acids, harmful bacteria, some viruses and other substances in the gastrointestinal tract. Dirt may contain clay, which has absorbent particles that can bind substances. The bound substances end up in the faeces of the horse.

There may be other motives why horses eat dirt. You should consult with a veterinarian when it's a re-occurring behaviour, as too much ingestion of dirt can cause digestive problems such as colic.

From Sue Martin – Equine Naturopath  
[www.naturalequinehealth.com.au](http://www.naturalequinehealth.com.au)

**T**he most common answer to this question is that the horse is mineral, or more specifically sodium deficient and is pawing the ground and licking the dirt in search of the missing minerals.

So how could this be correct if the horse has access to a mineral/salt lick or the horse is being fed large amounts of mineral supplementation in pre mixed feeds?

The answer could be that the horse is being fed an excessive amount of supplementation and the overlap of minerals is causing a deficiency. It is also worth noting that many mineral licks have the addition of flavourings such as molasses and salt which will encourage licking even if the minerals are not needed.

Another reason may be that the horse is suffering from digestive upset. If this is the case the horse may look to ingest certain clays which have properties which will allow them to absorb/bind to the toxins thus allowing them to be expelled from the body in the manure.

If your horse is suffering from a lack of beneficial bacteria in the gut, this may be the reason for eating dirt as soils contain many beneficial micro organisms which your horse may be lacking.

From Cathy Tighe, Homeopath  
[www.healwithease.com](http://www.healwithease.com)

**T**he eating of perceived undigestible products like clay, dirt, charcoal, etc is a natural process for all animals. Horses will eat dirt to help with mineral imbalances and to aid with digestion at different times throughout their lives. It is a natural, healthy process that is nothing to worry about.

From a homeopathic point of view when we see animals such as cats, dogs and horses eating dirt, we understand that they are lacking in minerals either because they are not being provided these in their diet or because their bodies are not absorbing the minerals they are receiving.

We use and recommend a body balancing tonic that rebalances the system, and also allows the body to absorb all the goodness (vitamins, minerals, protein, etc) from their food. Long term this means a healthier horse and also a reduction in your feed and supplement costs because your horse is getting maximum value out of their diet.

From Dr Amy Garcia DVM  
Garrards Equine Veterinary Practice

**T**his is a common question that veterinarians are asked, but the answer is not always simple. There are many reasons why a horse will appear to eat dirt, and finding the answer may take some trial and error. A horse that is in the habit of eating or licking dirt may be exhibiting a sign of a medical issue, such as gastrointestinal upset or a neurologic disorder.

Other causes include deficiencies in dietary salts and minerals, deficiencies in a healthy population of bacteria in the gut (caecum), or out of pure boredom. Your horse may be attempting to supplement their diet with what their body is craving, because dirt inherently has salts and minerals within its composition. Therefore a dietary change, or even supplementation of minerals is all that is necessary.

Also, horses naturally build the population of microorganisms in their caecum by eating feces. This can easily be mistaken for eating dirt in some circumstances, and in this case a probiotic may be all your horse needs.

If your horse is eating/licking dirt out of boredom, it may be best to add some mental and physical stimulation to their day. Having a veterinarian perform a blood test and an examination may help to rule out a more serious cause of your horse eating or licking dirt.

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