

# Desert Genes

## Reclaiming the Natural Strength of the Straight Egyptian Arabian

By Jennifer OGDEN – Qatar

In the soft morning light of Qatar, when the air is still and the desert begins to breathe, I often watch the mares step quietly from the breezeway.

There's a rhythm to their movement, ancient, deliberate, unhurried and in those moments, I'm reminded that these horses carry not just beauty, but memory.

For over fifty years I've lived and worked with Arabian horses, from my own breeding farm to managing Straight Egyptian Arabians for some of Qatar's most well-known breeding programs, and one claim I hear over and over is that 'Straight Egyptians have bad legs. It's become almost folklore. But after years of foaling, feeding, and watching the next generation grow, I've come to a very different conclusion: the problem isn't in their genes. It's in what we've been feeding them.

### The Desert Never Grew Grain

The Straight Egyptian Arabian was never meant to thrive on modern, grain-rich rations. Their ancestors survived on the sparse forage of the desert, dry, fibrous, mineral-balanced, and naturally low in sugar and starch. That simplicity shaped their very physiology.

When we impose Western style feeding that is full of cereals, molasses, and starch, we're asking a desert horse to live on something

Golden light over the breezeway in early morning. A mare steps forward with her foal beside her — dust drifting softly in the sun.



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entirely alien to its biology. The results speak for themselves: limb deviations, OCD's, metabolic stress, cresty necks, and unstable temperaments.

But when we remove grain and hold sugar and starch around ten percent,

something extraordinary happens. Foals are born with clean, straight limbs, true to type and balanced. Their joints are tight, their bones grow evenly, and their frames align with the ancient desert blueprint.



## Nutrition Writes the Skeleton

Through experience and observation, I've come to believe that nutrition literally writes the skeleton. What a mare consumes during pregnancy, and what a foal receives during its growth phase, determines the story their bones will tell.

Too much sugar and starch distort that story, soft cartilage, weak joints, uneven pressure that pulls young legs offline. But feed the way nature intended, fibre, controlled protein, balanced minerals, and natural oils like cold-pressed linseed and you see a completely different picture.

Of course, there can be a genetic component too. Some horses cope far less well with high-sugar, high-starch diets than others. Their metabolic tolerance is lower, and they develop inflammatory responses, while other horses may appear outwardly fine, at least for a while. The difference lies in how efficiently the hindgut digests and processes starch. Horses that are sensitive or inefficient starch digesters are far more prone to acidosis, joint strain, and developmental deviations.

It's often quite easy to tell when a horse is struggling with digestion, the smell of the manure changes. A sour, yeasty or "fermenting" odour is a clear sign that undigested sugars and starches are reaching the hindgut, leading to acid imbalance. When the smell is strong or unusual, it's your early warning that something in the diet isn't being digested properly.

## The Hidden Inflammation

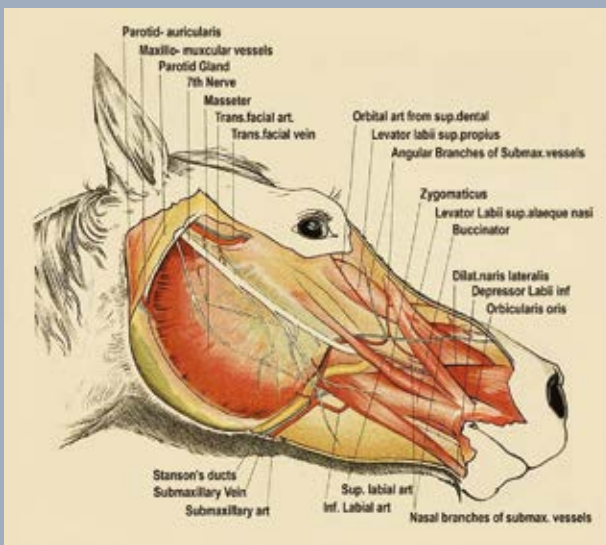
Over time, I began to notice another pattern, it was subtle at first, then unmistakable. Horses on high-grain diets, especially those containing soybean, were developing unexplained swellings around the parotid gland, just below the ear.



Soybean, I believe, is a major allergen for many horses, especially the sensitive desert types. It is also one of the most genetically modified crops in the world, used heavily in cheap, mass-produced feed because it's economical, not because it's healthy. Beyond being highly allergenic, soy and corn oils are rich in omega-6 fatty acids, which promote inflammation.

When horses consume these oils and soy-

These parotid gland swellings that often referred to as “grass mumps”, are now thought to be less about pasture or pollen and more about diet. In particular, reactions to grain-based feeds and soy products seem to be a major trigger. Soybean meal, a common ingredient in many commercial feeds, can cause inflammatory or allergic responses in some horses, showing up as swelling below the ear or along the jawline. Here in Qatar, where most horses have little or no access to grazing, it makes sense that the cause isn't grass at all, but feed-related. Removing soy and high-grain components from the diet and replacing them with grain-free, low-omega-6 options often results in the swellings disappearing altogether.



based feeds, inflammation spreads quietly through the body affecting the parotid glands, reproductive tract, and joints. Removing soy and replacing it with natural oils such as CEN Oil or cold-pressed linseed produces visible changes, the swelling disappears, coats shine, and energy levels balance.

Recently a breeder approached me about one of his fillies that was severely underweight and depressed; he was concerned she was

dying. Her carers had changed her feed several times and tried a range of treatments, including anti-inflammatories, steroids and antibiotics, but nothing worked. She had completely stopped eating, refusing even her favourite feeds.

I suspected ulcers were at the root of it. Once I treated her for that and began stripping her diet back to its simplest form, removing each grain one by one, the picture became clear. She wasn't just intolerant; she was highly allergic particularly to soybean. Even a small amount caused a dramatic reaction, and the swelling would begin around the parotid gland before spreading under her jaw, down her neck, and across her throat.

After eliminating all grains, within weeks her appetite began to return. We would occasionally test with different grains, hays, and treats, interestingly, she could not even tolerate apples, but the worst reaction was always to soybean and corn. Over four months on the grain-free diet with dry hay, she regained weight, her coat and muscle tone transformed, and the allergic swelling never reappeared. Today she's strong, bright, and thriving, a living example of how much healing begins not necessarily in the medicine box, but in the feed bin.

Another fascinating change we observed was related to pigmentation. When we switched the horses to a completely grain-free diet, removing soy, corn, and grains we not only reduced the fat deposits on their necks and bellies but also saw their muscle and topline condition improve. And as we balanced their minerals, something remarkable happened, the pigmentation that had faded around their eyes and muzzles started to return. We had one filly born almost entirely pink due to the previous high grain diet her dam was on. After about six to eight weeks on the new feeding plan, her pigmentation came

back fully, and even during the summer when traditionally pigmentation is lost, her pigmentation remained with no further loss. We then applied the same approach to older horses, and sure enough, over time, their pigmentation restored as well. Depending on how long the pigmentation had been lost, it could take a bit longer, but the results were consistent and remarkable.

### **Form Without Force**

Even when preparing for shows, I never return to grain. I increase protein, add a clean protein topper, and for junior horses I keep the work slow and steady, ponying long walks, avoiding the round pen. For mature horses I like to longline, this helps lengthen and refine the top of the neck, soften the under neck, and keep the back relaxed strengthening hindquarters. Long relaxed rides complete the picture. The horses bloom. Their necks stay elegant, their bodies defined but never heavy, and their minds peaceful.

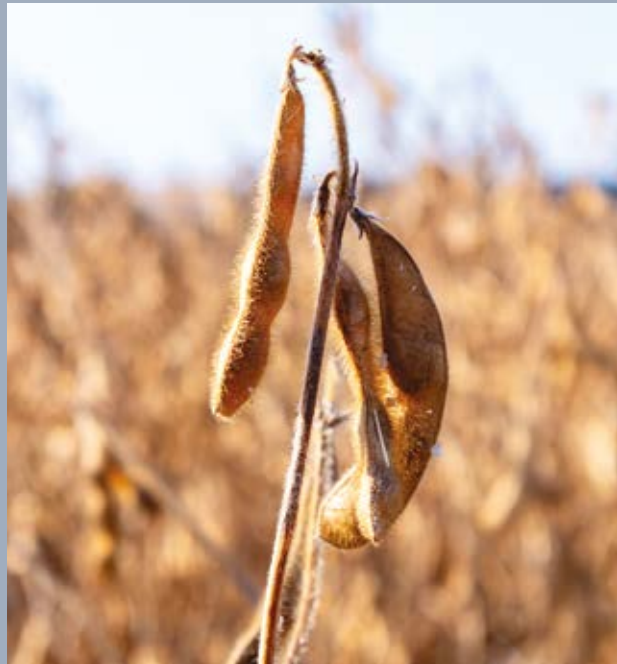
Traditionally, show preparation has relied heavily on high-grain, high-sugar diets to add energy and body weight before a competition. The idea was simple, more calories, more cover. It does put weight on, but it's the wrong kind of weight, fat that settles through the crest and belly. Then the struggle begins, long workouts, neck sweats, lotions, endless conditioning just to pull it back off in the right places.

What I've found is that when you feed a horse a balanced, low-sugar, low-starch diet, you're building condition from the inside out — true muscle, not stored fat. The body develops evenly and naturally, the topline comes up, and you no longer need to push them to exhaustion to sculpt the right form. When horses are fed large amounts of starch and sugar, you're forced to work them





Natural pasture is what horses were designed to live on — it's slow, fibrous, low in sugar, and balanced by nature. The omega ratios in preferably dryer native grasses are naturally anti-inflammatory, supporting joints, hooves, and overall soundness without the highs and crashes that come from rich green hays or grain feeds. When grazing isn't available or is restricted, the goal should always be to mimic what nature provides, a diet based on low-starch, high-fibre forage, balanced minerals, and a clean omega-3 source like cold-pressed linseed oil. That way, even in the absence of pasture, the horse's system stays as close as possible to how nature intended steady, sound, and in balance.



Soybean, soybean meal, by products and oil remains a common protein source in many commercial equine feeds; however, its elevated omega-6 content and phytoestrogen compounds can disturb metabolic balance. In some horses, soy also provokes allergic or inflammatory responses, manifesting as skin irritation, parotid swelling, or uneven fat distribution. The removal of soy from the diet frequently results in a more stable metabolic profile.

Pigmentation loss, especially around the eyes, muzzle, and flanks is something we often see in summer, and it's usually a sign of nutritional imbalance rather than just sun exposure. Many horses start to lose colour or develop pale patches when their diet is too high in sugar, starch, or omega-6 fatty acids, and too low in key trace minerals such as copper, zinc, and selenium. These nutrients are essential for healthy melanin production, skin integrity, and coat depth of colour. Once we corrected the mineral balance and shifted the horses onto a diet higher in omega-3 and lower in omega-6 using cold-pressed linseed oil instead of grain or soy-based feeds the difference was remarkable. Not only did the pigmentation return, but the coats became richer, softer, and far more resilient to the harsh summer conditions. It reinforced what we already suspected, true coat and pigment health starts from the inside, and balance is everything.



Visible Results of Nutritional Rebalancing Improved Topline Development, Enhanced Hair Quality, and Reduction of Metabolic Fat lumps. Following 3–6 Months on a Corrected Feeding Regime

harder and longer just to burn it off often in tight round pens or repetitive circles and that kind of pressure on young, growing joints is completely counterproductive. It builds tension instead of balance and can cause long-term joint stress and lameness in

horses that should still be developing gently. It's one of the reasons we're seeing far more lame horses in the show ring today, horses pushed beyond what their young joints can bear simply because of the way they're fed. It's exactly the same principle athletes use,

a bodybuilder doesn't live on bread and cereal. He eats protein, fish, chicken, eggs, and greens in order to develop strength without bulk. Horses are no different. When you fuel the body correctly, you build form without force.

For horses that are stabled for long hours, feeding four times a day helps enormously. Smaller, more frequent meals mimic the natural grazing rhythm and keep the gut stable.

### Sample Feeding Routine

There are now some excellent grain-free feeds available that support this system beautifully, including CEN Nutrition, St. Hippolyt, and Purina grain-free options.

At our stables in Qatar, we've settled on a balanced, grain-free routine that keeps horses calm, strong, and naturally conditioned:

- Feed frequency: Four times per day to mirror natural grazing.
- Base feed: A quality grain-free pellet with a combination of sugar + starch under 15% (ideally 10%).
- Protein topper: St. Hippolyt RiceLein — low in sugar, supports muscle and topline.
- Oil: CEN Oil, (cold pressed Linseed) 50 ml per day, for natural energy and coat health.
- Forage: Washed rhodes grass our local

hay fed ad libitum for constant fibre and hydration.

Avoid soybean-based feeds and vegetable oils such as corn or soy oils. Their inflammatory profile works directly against joint and reproductive health. Once you eliminate them, you'll often see the parotid swelling disappear within weeks, proof that less really is more.

### Back to the Source

I've learned that the answers don't lie in the latest supplement or feeding trend, but in going backward, back to the desert, to simplicity, to the origin of the breed itself. These horses evolved on scarcity and resilience. When we feed them according to that truth, everything else, conformation, behavior, fertility, soundness, all begins to align.

The Straight Egyptian Arabian does not need modern correction. It needs ancient wisdom. And in the quiet mornings, when I watch a newborn foal stand for the first time, straight, sure, and strong I know we've finally come home to what the desert always knew. There are now some excellent grain-free feeds available that support this system beautifully, including CEN Nutrition, St. Hippolyt, and Purina grain-free options.



### About the Author

Jennifer Ogden manages Straight Egyptian Arabian horses in Qatar for several private studs. She is recognized for her expertise in equine nutrition, holistic healing, and natural management, she holds a degree in Equine Business Management and Equine Nutrition from Hawkesbury Agricultural College (now the University of Western Sydney).

She provides specialized equine consultancy services encompassing Equine Nutrition, Horse Psychology, Barn Management, Breeding Selections, and more. Recognized for her expertise in holistic healing and natural management, she continues to champion sustainable, evidence-based approaches tailored to the desert environment and the unique physiology of the Straight Egyptian Arabian.

Beyond her work as a horsewoman, Jennifer is also an accomplished equine photographer, known for capturing the spirit, movement, and purity of the Arabian horse through her lens. Her work combines art and understanding — a reflection of her life among the horses she so deeply respects.