

Obesity

A study done by the Animal Health Trust in February 2014 has shown that as many as 1 in 3 horses in the UK would be classified as fat or obese. This is a worrying statistic however what is more worrying is that very few people know when their horse is overweight. With so many diseases being linked to obesity this is something we really need to get on top of now.



How can I tell if my horse is fat?

The main method of estimating how fat your horse is, is by body condition scoring. To find out your horse's weight you can use a weigh bridge or using a weight tape. The weigh bridge is the only accurate way of us being able to tell how heavy your horse is but both of the others can be used to help monitor your horse's condition.

Why is my horse fat?

Wild horses had evolved to rely on grass forage to provide them with adequate nutrition to maintain their condition all year round. Their bodies release hormones in autumn which stimulate their appetites and encourage their body to lay down fat so that they have enough energy to last through the winter. Feral or wild horses then use this fat supply as their source of energy throughout the winter so would have lost most, if not all, of the accumulated fat by the end of the winter.

However we're much kinder to our domesticated friends and often give them concentrated feeds and extra forage to increase their energy intake during the winter and put rugs on them to prevent them losing energy by having to keep themselves warm. So our horses these days go into the winter in good condition and often come out of the winter without having lost any weight and then put more weight on over the summer and autumn and so the cycle continues.

What does it matter?

There are multiple reasons as to why carrying excess fat is bad for our horses. The one most people will be aware of (or should be) is that excessive weight is the commonest predisposing factor for laminitis. However as well as that, it puts extra stress on our horses' limbs, especially their joints, and their cardiovascular system.

How can I help my horse lose weight? It is possible even if they are a 'good-doer'!

It has been shown that ponies can consume nearly half of their entire daily intake during just 3 hours of grazing. So unfortunately restricting the length of time we turn them out for is not necessarily going to restrict their intake sufficiently to help them lose weight.

For the most effective weight loss ideally we would know exactly how much our horses are eating 24/7. Unfortunately the only way we can do this is by preventing them from grazing completely. There are ways of doing this even if you don't have a stable to confine them to.



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Equine

Daily consumption should be 1.2-1.7% of their body weight (estimate with a weigh tape or use a weigh bridge). That includes everything! Weigh your hay and any other feed your horse will be receiving. Remove any concentrates from the feed completely, with the exception of a feed balancer which will help ensure they're still getting enough protein, vitamins and minerals. Soaking hay for 8-12 hours is a good way of reducing its energy content but make sure you weigh it before you soak it.

Using a grazing muzzle is a good way of restricting the amount your horse can eat when out at grass and can be very useful after they've lost weight to prevent them putting it back on again. Other things you can do include:

- Increasing the amount of exercise your horse does; extra lunging sessions or using a horse walker are fairly time efficient ways of doing.
- As the cold weather approaches keep the rugs off! By not using as many rugs your horse will burn energy to keep them warm.

Monitor your horse's weight loss using a tape or a weigh bridge. Ideally you should aim for a loss of 0.5-1% per week but in the initial week or two they can lose up to 4% just due to reduced gut fill.

It's always a good idea to talk to your vet before putting your horse on a strict diet or if you have any worries about your horse's weight.



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Scarsdale Vets - Equine
Markeaton Lane
Derby
DE22 4NH
Telephone: 01332 294929
www.scarsdalevets.com/equine

