



WENSUM VALLEY VETS NEWSLETTER

Equine Obesity Part 3: Treating the Problem - Safe Weight Loss, Diet & Exercise Strategies

💡 Good News: Obesity is Manageable

If you've identified your horse is overweight, this is the first step towards solving the problem! Don't panic - with careful management, most horses can safely return to a healthy body condition. The key is to make changes gradually, consistently, and with veterinary guidance.

🥕 Diet - The Cornerstone of Weight Loss

Horses are designed to eat little and often, but we can adapt forage and grazing access to reduce calories while still meeting fibre needs.

Safe feeding guidelines:

If hard food is needed to provide medications in, avoid cereals and high-starch feeds; use only a small amount of low-calorie balancer to supply vitamins and minerals. For forage, feed at 1.5% of target bodyweight in hay per day. For a 500 kg horse aiming for a healthy weight of 450 kg, that's 6.75 kg hay daily. Ideally you would always weigh this forage with a luggage scale to keep it consistent, then soak hay in water (2-12 hours) to reduce its sugar content. This could be fed via small-holed haynets or multiple nets layered together to slow intake.

Pasture management tools:

Strip grazing or creating a paddock "track system" reduces access to new grass and can encourage movement. Grazing muzzles can be effective in some cases but check fit daily to avoid rubs and consult a vet if your horse has dental issues. It can be useful to restrict turnout times during periods of high grass growth (spring/early summer, after rain) and reduce overall turnout time each day. ⚠️ Never completely starve a horse - sudden, severe restriction can cause problems.

🏃 Exercise - Moving Towards Health

Exercise helps burn calories, improves insulin sensitivity, and supports joint health. Start gently if your horse is unfit



or has recently recovered from laminitis or lameness - hand-walking, long-reining, or light hacking are all great places to start. Build gradually aiming for about 30-45 minutes of brisk work 5-6 days/week once fitness improves. For fitter horses in harder work, ensure their diet matches workload without providing excess calories. Even small, consistent increases in activity add up over time.

Setting Realistic Goals

A good target is losing 0.5-1% bodyweight per week (2.5-5 kg for a 500 kg horse). You can use body condition score, cresty neck score, and your weigh tape every month to monitor this progress, or come to the practice and use our scales. It can also be motivational to record changes with photos or have a friend who keeps you accountable. There may be other horses on your yard also needing to lose weight, a horse weight-watching group or group chat can help keep motivation.

When to Involve your Vet

Weight loss is not always straightforward. Veterinary input is vital if:

- Your horse is showing signs of laminitis - this is a veterinary emergency.
- Your horse fails to lose weight despite restrictions.
- Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS), or Equine Cushing's (PPID) is suspected.
- You would like any advice on a safe, structured plan.

We can:

- Perform metabolic testing (insulin, glucose, ACTH) for EMS/PPID.
- Provide a tailored feeding and exercise plan.
- Offer regular assessments to keep progress on track.



Owner Action Plan for This Month

- Set a target weight for your horse with our help.
- Start a daily forage weighing routine.
- Introduce gentle, regular exercise appropriate for fitness level.
- Record weight and BCS monthly to celebrate small wins.



We're Here to Support You

Helping horses achieve and maintain a healthy weight is a team effort. Whether it's diet plans, metabolic testing, or regular progress checks, we're here to guide you.



 *Call us on 01328 86444 to discuss a tailored weight-loss programme for your horse.*