



## Does my Horse look big in this?

The question everyone wants to know, is my horse's body condition okay? In the majority of cases, the answer is NO! It is so difficult to wade through the extensive online forums to get a true idea of whether you're doing the right thing or not. Someone will always be doing something different to you and believe their management is superior to everyone else's. Then you have the pony that only has to look at grass and put on 50kg. All in all, horse weight management is a minefield, and we wanted to put together a checklist to help you re-think your weight loss strategies!

### How to Body Condition Score (BCS)

We've all seen the charts of fat horse to thin horse and the areas we look at specifically, so this is a little recap of the 3 major areas:

1. Crest/Neck - Thin layer of fat felt under the skin, should be able to feel muscle where crest meets the neck.
2. Ribs + Back - Ribs should either be seen or felt with very light pressure. The back should be flat.
3. Rump - Sloping or slightly rounded (should NOT resemble an apple!)

### Feed

The main thing to remember, just like us, is that if you put in more calories than you need it will be turned into fat. Changing feeding routine can be difficult and daunting but it doesn't have to be! Here are a few tips to help your horse lose weight:

- Weighing hay/haylage - for weight loss we recommend your horse consumes 1.25% of it's ideal body weight in forage. This means for a 500kg animal it should have 6.25kg of hay/haylage throughout a 24 hour period \*
- Soaking - Soaking hay for 8-12 hours is the optimum time to reduce sugar content. Also if soaking the ration, you can add feed 1.5% of their body weight in 24 hours\* which helps with hungry horses!

\*if your horse is turned out in this 24 hour period the amount of hay/haylage fed needs reducing accordingly. E.g. 6kg in 24 hours but turned out for 12 hours a day, only feed 3kg while stabled.

- Keeping them occupied - horses are trickle feeders and need a constant slow supply of feed. So if your horse can munch through their ration in an hour we need to slow them down! Double and even triple netting are great ways to slow them down, also using hay balls - keeps them occupied and allows slow feeding! If you are on the yard for a long period of time feeding little and often can be a great way to guarantee trickle feeding.
- Bucket feeds – Hard feed requirements will depend on their level of work/management however most horses who are overweight only need a balancer or a vitamin and mineral supplement (which needs to be added to a low calorie chaff). The most important thing to remember however is the sugar and starch content. Switching to the low sugar and starch options is an easy way to combat this.
- Straw - Straw is a great way of bulking out forage while keeping calories low (think of it like celery!) adding in 25% of the total ration can really help keep your horse occupied. One thing to remember however, without up to date dental treatment feeding straw can be difficult as it takes longer to chew and if the horse has dental disease this could lead to an impaction. Only consider adding in straw if your horse receives regular dental care.

### Exercise

The major limiting factor realistically is our own time, but you don't have to spend hours every day doing complicated weight loss exercises to be successful. Again, think little and often. 15mins a day increasing your horses heart rate by trotting and even cantering on the lunge will certainly help. Unfortunately a short walk around the block won't be enough! Just think, have I managed to get their heart rate up?

### Management

To rug/clip or not to rug/clip this is the age old question. Unfortunately there is not a 'one rule fits all' policy. Lots of horses are different and require different management routines. Although it may seem cruel allowing your horse to shiver off a bit of fat over the winter, it will really help in controlling their weight at a time when most horses are stabled and doing very little work. Horses should naturally lose weight in the winter to reduce their risk of problems in the summer.

### Has my horse got a metabolic condition?

Maybe you've tried all the above and are still really struggling. Maybe it's not something you're doing/not doing, maybe nature is working against you?

EMS - Equine metabolic syndrome is a disorder associated with inappropriate levels of blood insulin. It can be compared to human diabetes. Unlike humans where our bodies stop producing insulin. The horse's body stops responding to it, in this case we call it insulin dysregulation. When the body stops responding to insulin levels, the level of glucose (sugar) in the blood increases. This can lead to abnormal fat deposits which horses struggle to shed. These abnormal fat deposits can then undergo fat metabolism, this causes the release of steroid hormones which in turn can contribute to laminitis.

## Drugs

If we suspect your horse of being at risk of EMS we will take a blood test to look at those insulin levels. If positive we may recommend metabolic boosting drugs. If we get a negative result we may recommend a glucose test. This consists of giving your horse a syringe of sugar syrup 90mins before we arrive at the yard, we will then take a blood test to assess your horse's body's insulin response to the sugars. We may also recommend the drugs if we believe your horse needs a little bit of help with weight loss. Most people may be aware of metformin already, however we now have a wider range of drugs available that may be more suited to your routine.