

Wright & Morten Equine Newsletter



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Winter weight management top tips



In the wild, horses would naturally lose weight over the winter and gain weight in the summer. However, our management often results in weight gain in the summer but no or minimal weight loss in the winter. This weight loss is important to go into spring in a lower body condition score which will reduce the risk of certain health conditions such as laminitis. Here are our top tips for winter weight management:

1. Weigh their hay- knowing how much you are feeding is really important, especially with greedy horses. As a general rule for a horse to maintain its weight you should feed 2% of their body weight in kg of hay in 24 hours. So, a 500kg horse would need 10kg of hay in 24 hours.

If your horse is grazing for part of this day reduce this accordingly eg if grazing for 12 hours, feed 5kg hay for the other 12 hours. If your horse needs to lose weight we would recommend reducing this to 1.5-1.75% of their body weight. Additionally, if you feed hay this can be soaked for 12 hours prior to feeding to reduce the sugar levels by 50%! If further weight loss is required up to 30% of the hay ratio can be replaced with straw but this must be introduced gradually.

Haylage is not as good for overweight horses as the fermentation process actually increases the insulin level which can in turn

increase the risk of laminitis. When feeding haylage, because it has a higher water content, you should feed 2.3% of your horse's body weight in 24 hours. Unfortunately haylage should not be soaked as this increases its acidity levels.

2. Make their food last longer- feeding smaller volumes is often a concern if horses are then spending long periods of time without food. Consider ways of slowing down their intake through double netting, trickle feeding systems, feeding little and often while on the yard or asking a friend to give the next instalment of hay a couple of hours after you leave to try and spread the total volume over a longer period.

3. Does your horse need hard feed? Horses in good body condition score and in low to moderate work often don't need additional hard feed except a low-calorie balancer or vitamin and mineral supplement which can be fed with a low calorie chop. Always check the sugar and starch content of the feed, don't necessarily believe the marketing! We would recommend below 5% sugar and starch for an overweight horse or one suffering from laminitis. If in doubt most feed companies provide free advice over the phone.

4. Be aware of winter grass growth- When the temperature is above 4°C the grass will grow. Sunny days and cold nights result in more sugar in the grass. Under such conditions horses will ingest more sugar and therefore need less hay when stabled.

5. Monitor their weight regularly- The most accurate way of doing this is to use a weight bridge- we have one at our Somerford clinic and clients are welcome to book in to use this free of charge and we can have a nurse on hand to assist. Weigh tapes, although less accurate, can still be really helpful as they can be done regularly but they need to be put in the same place each time- clip a small bit of hair to ensure you line up with this each time. The tape should go at the lowest part of the wither and pass as close behind the elbow as possible around the horse.

6. Keep a record- Keeping a record of the quantities of feed your horse is eating, the time they are turned out for, the amount of exercise they receive, and their weekly weight will help you review any changes and adjust accordingly- you should aim to lose between 0.5-1% of their body weight every week, any more can be dangerous. Using a body condition score guide is also helpful.

Tune in next month for part 2!



Vaccinations

As the competition season is upon us, just a reminder to check your horse's vaccinations are up to date and in line with the rules for the governing bodies under which you compete.

Please also bear in mind that vaccination rules may vary slightly between organisations and venues, so it is important that you check what their rules are.

Whilst we do send out reminders when vaccinations are due, don't forget it is your own responsibility to ensure that your vaccinations are booked in, in time. The zones do get quite booked up so please make sure that you plan ahead and book your appointment well in advance.

Sweet itch

How to ditch the itch!

Every year as the weather gets warmer, we start to see horses with sweet itch. This is an allergic reaction to the saliva of *Culicoides* commonly called midges. Although they can often be allergic to other biting insects such as mosquitos and horse flies as well. It can be intensely itchy with affected horses continuously scratching often causing hair loss and sometimes enough to cause open sores. The itch is most intense where the flies bite which is along the mane and top line, the tail and also under the belly.



The best way to help these horses is by preventing them getting bitten by flies in the first place. There are many things you can do to reduce the number of bites your horse gets:

- Good quality fly rugs which prevent the flies landing to bite.
- Keeping horses stabled when flies are at their most active during the day and at dusk,
- Avoid fields with ponds or streams as these will attract midges and other insects.
- Use a good Fly repellent regularly - permethrin-based ones are most effective such as Deosect.
- Barrier creams placed along the mane and tail

There are also treatments to help reduce the reaction of the horse when they get bitten by midges:

- Insol dermatophyton- This is a relatively new treatment which can help reduce the symptoms of sweet itch. It is a vaccine given in two doses two weeks apart before the weather gets warm so ideally February or March.
- Cutasol- This is a lipid-based foam which acts as a barrier to midges but also soothes the skin reducing itchiness.
- Oatmeal based shampoos- These can be soothing on irritated skin.
- Steroid based creams or sprays- these are to reduce the itchiness and

inflammation in areas where they are causing self-trauma and can be effective.



Often these itchy horses actually have a secondary problem to their sweet itch or fly allergy. We regularly see and treat horses with bacterial skin infections, leg-mites and lice, all of which can make an itchy horse even more itchy. All of these are treatable with medication or management. Because of this it is important to make sure we find the cause of the itchiness to provide the best treatment plan. But this means we generally have a good outcome in managing these cases so they don't rub themselves raw every year.



We also get horses who are allergic to things other than insects and several tests to work out what they are allergic to are available. One is a blood test which measure a horse's response to different allergens. The allergens used include pollens, animal skin cells, grasses and insects. Identifying exactly what a horse is allergic to can allow us to avoid them. This avoidance can make a dramatic difference.

Importantly it also allows us to formulate tailor-made allergen specific immunotherapy (ASIT) which can be used to desensitise horses to the substances they are allergic to, this is a series of injections over several months. This can be very effective in reducing the reaction to the allergens dramatically.

Overall, there are many things which make our horses itch but we have many options for treating them and can help stop them hurting themselves scratching. So, if you have any concerns about treating or managing your horse if they are itchy, please contact us for advice.

The Insol vaccine is also now available if you want to book your horse in for the course of injections. Please call the office on 01260 280800 for further information and to book in. This can be done on a zone day.



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