

## Easy Keepers: Managing Overweight Horses and Ponies

By Heather Hilgartner, DVM

Does your horse or pony seem to gain weight from love and air alone? When fed the same diet, why do some horses struggle to maintain their weight, while others tend to pack on the pounds? Although the overall equation is simple, with energy balance equaling the difference between calories absorbed and calories burned, the reason behind why some horses require more nutrition than others is complex. Genetics, overfeeding, and insufficient physical activity can contribute to development of obesity. It is thought that the ability for some horses to survive on fewer calories was once an adaptive advantage for horses in the wild when sustenance was scarce. Today, this same quality in horses that are fed regularly may result in over-nutrition and secondary disease.

Obesity has been shown to increase risk of laminitis, or “founder”. Laminitis is inflammation of the lamina connecting the hoof wall to the coffin bone within the feet. It can result in severe foot pain, and the effects of laminitis can be life-threatening. Obesity can also potentially lead to impaired ability to regulate body temperature, reduced athletic performance, increased joint strain, and increased risk of developmental orthopedic problems in young, growing horses.

Horses come in all shapes and sizes at varying fitness levels and growth stages. Specific breed characteristics and phenotypic variability among horses make it impossible to base an ideal body weight on any one trait or measurement. Consequently, “body condition scores” (BCS) are routinely used by veterinarians to categorize each unique horse. The scoring system ranges from 1-9 (1 =poor; 9 = obese). Scoring incorporates a number of factors, including evaluation of areas of the body where fat tends to deposit, such as the neck, tail-head, behind the shoulder, and over the ribs. The ideal BCS for the average horse is 5/9. In this category, a horse will have ribs that are minimally visible, but easily felt beneath the skin. It is important when assessing body condition to place your hands on a horse, as a shaggy coat can hide a lot!

If you suspect your horse is overweight, your veterinarian can help you develop a diet and exercise program to get your horse back on track. Have a baseline of current diet and exercise prepared. This includes all supplements and treats! The first step is to determine your horse’s BCS and ideal body weight. In an average sized horse (1000-1100 lb), each body condition score represents approximately 50 lbs. For example, a horse weighing 1200 lbs with a BCS of 7/9 would need to lose approximately 100 lbs to reach its ideal body weight of 1100 lbs.

General guidelines to follow:

- Changes in the diet and exercise should be gradual, over a matter of weeks to months. Do not decrease your horse's total ration by greater than 10% per week. Adjustments should be made depending on how your horse responds, and a maintenance program should be developed once your horse has reached its weight goal.
- Prolonged feed withholding and drastic decreases in caloric intake can be harmful. A horse needs to consume at least 1% of its body weight of forage daily on a dry matter (DM) basis, with the maintenance requirement for the average horse being approximately 2% of body weight (DM). Begin by feeding hay or hay substitute at no more than 1.5% of current body weight per day.
- Forage should provide the basis of your horse's diet. More mature hay, characterized by a higher stem to leaf ratio, can help cut calories. This provides higher fiber, lower energy, and fewer non-structural carbohydrates. Poor quality hay should still be avoided, as it could lead to colic or may simply be unpalatable.
- Concentrates (grain) should be eliminated from the diet first. If your horse does not have free access to pasture, feed hay or a complete feed split into more frequent, smaller meals.
- Control your horse's intake. Restricted grazing can be instituted by dry lot turnout or by using a grazing muzzle. Hay nets with smaller holes can be used to slow consumption. Feeding horses separately can ensure every horse gets what you feed.
- Have fresh, clean water available at all times.
- Consider a ration balancer to provide essential protein, vitamins and minerals if only forage is fed.

Just as in people, every calorie counts. If your horse is beginning to tip the scales, excessive feeding may increase its risk of developing some serious health problems.

Contact your veterinarian to develop a custom diet and exercise plan for your horse. Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email [info@brandonequine.com](mailto:info@brandonequine.com) with any questions regarding this topic.

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