

Is Your Horse Overweight? <http://www.equestrianmag.com>

Equine obesity is a growing problem, and many breeders and owners don't understand the issues that surround the plump horses in their stables. We will look at some of the reasons behind the growing epidemic and discuss ways that you can keep your horses in the best shape possible, thus ensuring many more years together.

The Nature of the Beast

When left to their own demise, horses will overeat. If you give them hay or feed, they will be happy to eat every last morsel that is thrown their way. And when they ran wild, this mentality was just as it should be. When they were able to find food, they could have their fill, because their next meal may be a few more miles down the road (or maybe more.) Mother Nature intended for horses to store up some fat in preparation for the fall and winter months. When left out to graze, they would naturally get less food during the colder months and more food during the spring and summer months. So their bodies are genetically engineered to store more fat when winter rolls around. The problem occurred when horses began to get domesticated. Nowadays, horses are fed well year-round, which usually means excess calories. Many also get far too little exercise, which can naturally help them lose weight and gain muscle tone.

Throw in the fact that many owners are feeding their horses the wrong types of food, and we have a hefty problem on our hands.

Health Problems

An overweight horse is much more than an eyesore, excess pounds can cause significant health problems for your horse. Some of these include:

- Increased stress on the heart and lungs
- Greater risk of laminitis or founder
- Increased risk of developmental orthopedic (bone and joint) problems in young, growing horses
- More strain on feet, joints, and limbs
- Worsened symptoms of arthritis
- Less efficient cooling of body temperatures
- Fat build-up around key organs which interferes with normal function
- Reduced reproductive efficiency
- Greater lethargy and more easily fatigued

Questions to Ask

So then the question comes up, "How can I tell if my horse is overweight?" The following are some general guidelines courtesy of AAEP, on how to tell if there is a problem.

Because "fitness" is subjective, equine health care professionals utilize a "Body Condition Scoring" system to talk in relative terms. The horse's physical condition is rated on visual appraisal and palpation (feel) of six key conformation points: A-the amount of flesh or fat covering along the neck, B-the withers, C-down the crease of the back, D-at the tailhead, E-ribs, F-and behind the shoulder at the girth. Scores range from 1-9, from poor to extremely fat.

Score of 1-Poor: Animal extremely emaciated spinous processes, ribs, tailhead, tuber coxae (hip joints), and ischia (lower pelvic bones) projecting prominently; bone structure of withers, shoulders, and neck easily noticeable; no fatty tissue can be felt.

Score of 2-Very Thin: Animal emaciated, slight fat covering over base of spinous processes; transverse processes of lumbar vertebrae feel rounded, spinous processes, ribs, tailhead, tuber coxae (hip joints) and ischia (lower pelvic bones) prominent withers, shoulders, and neck structure faintly discernible

Score of 3-Thin: Fat buildup about halfway on spinous processes; transverse processes cannot be felt; slight fat cover over ribs; spinous processes and ribs easily discernable; tailhead prominent but individual vertebrae cannot be identified visually, tuber coxae (hip joints) appear rounded but easily discernable, tuber ischia (lower pelvic bones) not distinguishable, withers, shoulders and neck accentuated.

Score of 4-Moderately Thin: Slight ridge along back; faint outline of ribs discernable; tailhead prominence depends on conformation, fat can be felt around it; tuber coxae (hip joints) not discernable; withers, shoulders, and neck not obviously thin.

Score of 5-Moderate: Back is flat; ribs not visually distinguishable but easily felt fat around tailhead beginning to feel spongy; withers appear rounded over spinous processes; shoulders and neck blend smoothly into body.

Score of 6-Moderately Fleishy: May have slight crease down back; fat over ribs spongy, fat around tailhead soft; fat beginning to be deposited along side of withers, behind shoulders, and along sides of neck

Score of 7-Fleshy: May have crease down back; individual ribs can be felt, but noticeable filling between ribs with fat; fat around tailhead soft; fat deposited along withers behind shoulders, and along neck

Score of 8-Fat: Crease down back; difficult to feel ribs; fat around tailhead very soft; area along withers filled with fat; area behind shoulder filled with fat noticeable thickening of neck; fat deposited along inner thighs.

Score of 9-Extremely Fat: Obvious crease down back; patchy fat appearing over ribs; bulging fat around tailhead, along withers, behind shoulders, and along neck; fat along inner thigh may rub together; flank filled with fat. (Yourhorseshealth.com)

Most horses will want to fall in the range of 5-6.

Reaching a Healthy Weight

Helping your horse reach a healthier weight is not unlike what you would do for yourself. Regular exercise is essential for shedding unwanted pounds on your horse. Start an exercise program slowly, allowing your horse ample time to warm up. Keep in mind the age and overall fitness level of the horse before developing an exercise routine.

A careful restriction of calories is also a good idea, especially for horses that are very overweight. You will want to discuss your options with your veterinarian and map out a game plan. Most will recommend gradually decreasing the amount of calories your horse consumes over a period of time. He/she may also suggest feeding your horse a special low-fat feed specifically designed for horses, as many generic feeds contain growth hormones that can actually cause your horse to store up more fat than they normally would. Your vet will also remind you to provide ample amounts of fresh water, and may even recommend vitamins and supplements tailored to your horse's age and breed.

Last but not least, be patient. Your horse didn't gain all that weight overnight, and they won't lose it overnight either. A slow and steady weight loss is the best thing for your horse, so be diligent and you both will soon start to see results.

Resources:

http://www.yourhorseshealth.com/Main/General_Care/overweight_horse.cfm

http://petcaretips.net/overweight_horse.html

<http://www.equiworld.net/uk/horsecare/veterinary/laminitisbaileys.htm>

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/upi/index.php?feed=Science&article=UPI-1-20070425-20155500-bc-us-horseobesity.xml>