



Feeding is one of the most rewarding chores of horse ownership. But many horses, given the opportunity, will eat far more than they need, tipping the scale into an unhealthy balance. No matter how much your horse enjoys eating, you do it a disservice by overfeeding. Excess pounds put a strain on virtually every body system. A far kinder strategy is to supply food and exercise in proper amounts to keep your horse fit and healthy.

Maintaining the ideal weight is not always easy however. Some horses are what we call "easy keepers." They require minimal calories to maintain optimal body condition. Ponies, in particular, seem to store excess energy as fat. Many adult horses too -- especially those in their middle years -- begin to retain unneeded weight due to reduced activity and a slow-down metabolism. When weight gain becomes extreme, we classify the horse as obese.

HAZARD OF OBESITY - Excess weight and over-nutrition have a number of potentially negative effects, including:

- Increased stress on the heart and lungs
- Greater risk of laminitis or founder
- Increased risk of developmental orthopedic 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.
- Great lethargy and more easily fatigued.

WEIGHT REDUCTION - You hold the keys to controlling your horse's weight. You'll need to enforce sound nutrition management, become more dedicated to a regular exercise program, and use restraint when measuring the ration.

When implementing a weight loss program, it's important to do it in such a way so as not to stress the horse. Changes in both exercise and nutrition should be gradual. By increasing the amount of exercise, you can rev-up the horse's metabolic engine and burn more calories. By shifting to a lower calorie diet, you can create an "energy deficit" so that the horse begins to utilize its fat reserves as fuel. However, even though the ration provided fewer calories, it should be balanced so that it continues to provide all the essential nutrients. Develop a program that will allow your horse to reduce its weight without negative side effects.

HELP FOR HAY BELLIES - A "hay belly" may or may not be associated with true obesity. Many horses, especially the very young and old, may exhibit bellies without an associated build-up of body fat. Hay bellies are a distension of the abdominal area due to the volume of grass or hay the animal consumes. The belly expands to handle the load.

To eliminate a hay belly, you need to reduce the total volume of feed that passes through the system. A well-balanced complete feed may be a good way to reduce total volume without adversely affecting the amount of fiber and nutrients required for proper digestion and nutrition.

MAINTAINING PROPER WEIGHT - Once your horse has reached his ideal body condition, maintaining the proper weight is a gentle balancing act. You will probably need to readjust your horse's ration to stabilize its weight. Exercise will continue to be a key component in keeping the horse fit. Because obesity can effect a horse's health, keep a good line of communication open with your veterinarian. Schedule regular check-ups, especially during the weight reduction process.

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