



Horse Care:

Obesity

Why is Obesity a Problem?

Obesity is one of the most common health problems in horses today. While a round, well-fed horse might look appealing, carrying excess weight can have serious consequences for health and welfare.

Obesity isn't just a cosmetic issue - it's a major welfare concern. Overweight horses are at increased risk of:

- **Laminitis:** A painful and potentially life-threatening condition affecting the hooves. Obesity is one of the leading risk factors.
- **Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS):** A hormonal disorder linked to insulin resistance, which further increases laminitis risk.
- **Joint strain:** Extra weight puts pressure on joints, leading to arthritis and lameness.
- **Reduced performance:** Overweight horses tire easily, overheat, and are more prone to injuries.
- **Breathing difficulties:** Fat deposits can affect respiratory function.

Studies suggest that **up to 70% of UK horses and ponies are overweight**, making this a widespread issue that owners must take seriously.

Why Do Horses Get Fat?

Horses evolved to survive on sparse forage, moving long distances each day. Modern management often works against this natural design:

- **Rich grazing:** Lush pasture provides far more calories than most

horses need.

- **Overfeeding:** Concentrates and treats add unnecessary energy.
- **Lack of exercise:** Many horses are in light work or retired, so they burn fewer calories.
- **Seasonal factors:** Horses naturally gain weight in summer and lose it in winter. Rugs, stabling, and extra feed often prevent this natural weight loss.
- **Breed predisposition:** Native breeds and ponies are particularly efficient at storing fat, making them more prone to obesity.

How to Tell if Your Horse is Overweight

It's easy to underestimate your horse's weight, especially if you see them every day. The best way to assess condition is **Body Condition Scoring (BCS)**.

This involves feeling for fat coverage in key areas:

- Neck and crest: Is there a firm or floppy crest?
- Withers and shoulders: Are they rounded with fat pads?
- Ribs: Can you feel them easily without pressing hard?
- Tail head: Is there a soft pad of fat?

Most systems use a **0–5 or 1–9 scale**, with the ideal being **3/5 (or 5/9)**. A healthy horse should have ribs that are easy to feel but not visible, a smooth (not bulging) crest, and no deep fat pads.

Tip: Use a weigh tape or, ideally, a weighbridge to monitor changes. Even if the number isn't exact, tracking trends is very helpful.

Health Risks Linked to Obesity

Laminitis

This is the most serious consequence of obesity. Laminitis occurs when the sensitive laminae inside the hoof become inflamed, weakening the bond between the hoof wall and the pedal bone. It causes severe pain and can lead to permanent damage or euthanasia in extreme cases.

Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS)

EMS is a hormonal disorder strongly linked to obesity. Horses with EMS often have fat deposits on the neck (a “cresty” neck), above the eyes, and around the tail head. EMS significantly increases the risk of laminitis.

Joint and Mobility Issues

Extra weight strains joints, tendons, and ligaments, increasing the risk of arthritis and lameness.

Managing an Overweight Horse

If your horse is overweight, don't panic - safe, gradual weight loss is achievable with the right approach:

1. Adjust the Diet

- **Reduce calories:** Limit access to lush pasture and avoid high-energy feeds.
- **Soak hay:** Soaking for 6–12 hours can reduce sugar content.
- **Feed by weight, not volume:** Use a scale or weigh net to measure hay accurately.
- **Avoid treats:** Carrots and apples may seem harmless but add unnecessary sugar.

2. Control Grazing

- **Strip grazing:** Move the fence daily to limit grass intake.

- **Track systems:** Encourage movement while restricting grazing.
- **Grazing muzzles:** Reduce grass intake by up to 80%, but ensure they fit correctly and are used safely.

3. Increase Exercise

- **Regular work:** Even light exercise such as walking or lunging helps burn calories.
- **Consistency:** Aim for daily activity rather than occasional intense sessions.
- **Creative options:** In-hand walking, long-reining, or pole work can add variety.

4. Monitor Progress

- **Body condition scoring:** Check every 2–4 weeks.
- **Weigh tape:** Track changes over time.
- **Photographs:** Monthly photos help you see subtle differences.

5. Veterinary Support

Your vet can:

- Check for underlying conditions like EMS or PPID (Cushing's disease).
- Advise on safe weight-loss targets.
- Provide guidance on diet and exercise plans.

Prevention is Better Than Cure

Preventing obesity is easier than reversing it. Here's how:

- **Feed for work level:** Match calorie intake to activity.
- **Avoid over-rugging:** Overheating reduces calorie burn.
- **Regular weigh-ins:** Use a weighbridge or tape every few months.
- **Seasonal adjustments:** Reduce feed in winter if your horse is not

in hard work.

- **Stay alert:** Watch for fat pads on the crest, shoulders, and tail head.