

# THE OVERWEIGHT HORSE

Many equine are “easy keepers”. Minimal calories can maintain these horses at optimal body condition. Ponies seem to store excess energy as fat. Many adult horses – particularly in their middle years – tend to retain unneeded weight due to reduced activity and a slowed-down metabolism. Once weight gain becomes extreme, the horse is classified as obese. There are multiple risks related to **obesity**:

- ❖ Increased stress on vital organs
- ❖ Greater risk of laminitis or founder
- ❖ Increased risk of bone and joint problems in young, growing horses
- ❖ Added strain on hooves, joints and limbs
- ❖ Aggravation of arthritis
- ❖ Reduced reproductive efficiency
- ❖ Greater lethargy/fatigue

## Body Condition

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. Every breed presents a different body style. Stock horses (Quarter horses, Paints, Appaloosas) are often “stocky”, heavily muscled. Thoroughbred horses are lean and refined from miles of racing down the track. There are six key conformation points:

- ❖ A – 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 – behind the shoulder at the girth

Scores range from 1-9, from emaciated to extremely fat. Body condition scores in the moderate to moderately fleshy range (scores of 5 and 6) are ideal. With each breed and discipline comes a different fitness level. Polo, race and endurance horses might be perfectly fit at 4 (moderately thin) yet a horse ready for Halter class may be at 7 (fleshy). Feeding a horse to level 8 (**fat**) is pushing the limits of good health. Horses with scores of 8 or 9 are in need of a weight reduction plan.

*Weight Management takes up a lot of “space” so to speak. This entire issue! Next month we will cover Laminitis.*

“My horse is an easy keeper. He gains weight just looking at a blade of grass”.



## Weight Reduction – the “Whinny Craig” plan

You are your horses’ keeper. The key to their health is in your hands. Your horse doesn’t drive to the feed store when they’re hungry and pick out junk food. You pick out the junk food for the horse. The horse doesn’t go to the buffet on Sunday; you bring the buffet to the horse. **Enforcement** is the recipe for nutrition management, regular exercise and ration restraint. It is important not to stress your horse when beginning a weight loss program. Diet and exercise changes should be gradual.

## Plan Guidelines

- ❖ Be patient – weight loss should be a slow, steady process
- ❖ WRITE IT DOWN! Keep track of nutritional changes, track the horse’s weight by using a weight tape
- ❖ Increase the exercise program! Take your horse for a walk – you both will benefit. Your horse will lose weight and you will share quality, stress-free time together
- ❖ Always provide clean, fresh water so the digestive and other systems function as efficiently as possible
- ❖ Work with your veterinarian or an equine nutritionist to develop the best feed plan for your horse
- ❖ Make sure the horse’s vitamin, mineral and protein requirements are consistently met. A supplement can be added to rations to compensate for lower quality, less nutrient feeds.

## Maintain! Maintain! Maintain!

Once reaching the desired body weight, maintaining it is a balancing act.

Adjustment of your horse’s ration may be necessary to stabilize its weight.

**Exercise** will remain a key component in keeping your horse fit. Communicate with your veterinarian! Obesity and weight loss can affect your horse’s health. Schedule regular check-ups, especially during the weight loss process.

*Information provided by the American Association of Equine Practitioners*

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