

AN OWNER'S GUIDE TO EQUINE WEIGHT LOSS

Weight loss is a relatively common issue that horse owners are faced with. While these cases can sometimes be frustrating, for the majority of horses there is a simple, treatable solution.

Causes

There are a number of causes of weight loss in the horse and it is possible to have multiple contributing factors including:

- Inadequate nutrition
- Dental disease
- Worm burden
- Malabsorption syndrome (e.g. irritable bowel disease, lymphoma, geriatric malabsorption)
- Herd dynamics / behaviour / stress
- PPID (Cushing's)
- Liver / kidney disease
- EGUS (equine gastric ulcer syndrome)
- Osteoarthritis / chronic pain
- Chronic disease (e.g. equine grass sickness, cardiopulmonary disease)



The most common causes we see are related to nutrition, teeth and worms.

Investigation

We will take a detailed history of your horse's management and recent health with particular attention to nutrition, dental care, worming and any current medications. We will then perform a thorough clinical examination to assess overall health which will include or may result in the following:

- Dental examination to check for any issues which may be affecting your horse's ability to eat
- Blood tests to determine internal organ and blood cell function and hormone levels
- Faecal sample to assess worm burden
- Abdominal ultrasound
- Gastroscopy
- Abdominoscentesis (sampling the abdominal fluid)

The results of these tests will help us decide on the best treatment and management protocol for your horse. If there is any clinical disease this needs to be treated as without treatment your horse may struggle to gain weight despite good nutrition.

Behaviour

Many behavioural factors can contribute to weight loss in horses. Herd dynamics can have a huge impact on access to nutrition and stress levels. If a horse is lower down the pecking order it may not be allowed access to the best grazing or forage available in the field meaning that even if *ad lib* hay/haylage is provided not all horses will be getting their fair share. Ensuring that there is always an extra pile of hay/haylage compared to the number of horses will help. It is worth observing horses at different times of the day when they are turned out to see how the herd is behaving.



Being sold or moving to a new yard can be very stressful and it is not unusual for some horses to drop weight in these circumstances. Some horses can be easily stressed in general or may have stereotypies such as crib biting, wind sucking, weaving or box walking that mean they are less interested in food when stabled. Identifying these behaviours in horses can allow management changes to be made that reduces stress levels.

Nutrition

If nutrition is thought to be a contributing factor or if other potential causes of weight loss have been ruled out, then there are a number of tips you can try to reverse the weight loss in your horse:

- Turnout is preferable if good grass and shelter is available.
- If not, then provision of *ad lib* good quality hay or haylage is important.
- Depending on current work load it may be necessary to reduce the amount of work your horse is doing until an optimum weight is reached.
- Know your horse's weight. As a general rule they should consume 2% of their bodyweight daily.
- Feed high energy (conditioning) feeds, however, try to avoid high starch, cereal containing feeds and instead choose those based on non-starch carbohydrates (e.g. sugar beet pulp) and those high in fibre and oil (e.g. alfalfa). A cubed version of a feed is always lower in starch than a mix.
- Addition of oil to your horses feed. Oil is high in calories (approximately 2.5 times higher than carbohydrates) and is relatively easily digested and absorbed.

Feeding Oil

As with all new feeds, oil must be introduced gradually and while horses can have up to 100ml/100kg per day, palatability often becomes a limiting factor in the amount of oil fed. Building up to around 1 cup per day is generally sufficient for weight gain.

When feeding oil it is advised to combine it with a supplement containing Vitamin E and selenium (anti-oxidants). There are complete oil feeds available (e.g. Baileys Outshine) that are pelleted and combine a mixture of straight oils and antioxidants that are a less messy alternative to feeding liquid oil.

If you are just adding oils for calories a supermarket version is fine, although stick to pure oils (e.g. sunflower or corn oil) as opposed to blended ones (e.g. vegetable oil) as some horses react badly to these. For maximum health benefits oils with higher levels of Omega 3 are advised (e.g. linseed oil).

Please note that large quantities of oil are detrimental if fed to horses that have any form of liver disease. If in doubt, speak to your vet before changing your horse's diet.

Veteran Horse Tips

We generally find a higher proportion of older horses suffer from poor dentition and other systemic diseases and therefore, they may benefit from extra attention being paid to their nutrition. As well as the above advice, the following tips may also be beneficial to your horse:

- Chop forage if required. There are a number of 'hay replacer' feeds on the market that have shorter, softer fibre that is easier to chew. Grass nuts and alfalfa pellets can also provide an alternative to forage if dentition is particularly poor.
- Give small, frequent feeds.
- A treat ball filled with cubes and / or a lick can keep your horse busy between feeds if they struggle with eating forage and grass.
- Soak feed to allow easier chewing (warm water increases palatability). All cubes / nuts can be soaked and there are several feeds on the market specifically designed to be soaked prior to feeding (e.g. Allen & Page Fast Fibre / Veteran Vitality).
- Support the digestive system with a veteran supplement or balancer. Most of these also contain joint support.
- Ensure that any prescribed medication is given at the correct dose, at regular intervals.



Ongoing Management

One of the most important aspects in dealing with weight loss in your horse is the follow up monitoring of your horses condition. It is important to keep a record of how your horse is progressing so we can assess if we are heading in the right direction with their management. One of the simplest ways to do this is the regular use of a weigh tape on your horse. While these only give an estimation of your horses actual weight, they are very useful for monitoring an upwards or downwards trend.

If you are concerned about your horses weight loss and would like to discuss this with a vet or arrange a visit then please contact the office on 01361 889106.



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