

# Weight Management Factsheet

Update April 2020



Obesity is a common problem in the domestic horse population and can have a significant impact on health and welfare. Excess body condition increases strain on vital organs such as the heart and lungs and places more pressure on joints, tendons, and ligaments. Overweight horses/ponies are more likely to have equine metabolic syndrome which further increases their risks of developing laminitis.

**Weight gain occurs when there is more energy supplied than required. In most cases this can be resolved by decreasing feed and increasing exercise, but this must be done carefully.**

## Planning for Safe Weight Loss

1. Assess current weight/condition score - Body condition scoring - Weigh bridge (available for use at our clinic) - Weigh tape
2. Set a target - We usually set this on a target body condition score rather than exact weight
3. Reduce Food Intake - Feed 1.5% of current body weight per day for weight loss (7.5kg for a 500kg horse) - Remember this includes grass, hay, any hard feed and treats! - Start at 1.5%, if no progress is made speak to your vet about safely changing this
4. Increase exercise - Making an exercise plan should be done with guidance from your vet as each case is individual and any other conditions e.g. lameness must be considered.

## Managing Feeding

- Reduce calories not bulk - horses require a high percentage of forage
- Feed a high fibre low carbohydrate diet
- Weigh hay (before soaking) to ensure you are not overfeeding
- Soak hay for 30-60 minutes prior to feeding
- Restrict grazing: this is best done by removing from field completely or wearing a grazing muzzle. Restricting time on grass alone is not effective as horses can consume

their daily requirements in as little as 4 hours.

- With greedy horses/ponies, using a small hole hay net or double netting can reduce the speed at which they finish their hay. Hanging several small hay nets in the stable can encourage more natural grazing behaviour
- Always allow access to water
- Cut out sugary treats - this can be difficult but sometimes you need to be cruel to be kind!

**It is important to make dietary changes gradually - any sudden alterations can have negative implications for gut health.**

## Monitor Progress

Log progress weekly (weight/body condition score). - This will help to make any alterations necessary.

Successful weight loss requires a lot of discipline on the owner's part. Occasionally medical management may be added to a diet/exercise programme but there is no magic diet pill for horses! If you have a horse/pony who is overweight, please contact us to discuss this with our vets who will be happy to help formulate a suitable weight loss programme.



Above: a pony who has successfully lost weight. Note the fat deposits (circled) on the crest of her neck in the photo on the left

## How to Body Condition Score your Horse or Pony

Body condition scoring is an excellent way to assess the amount of fat that your horse is carrying, and to monitor progress on your weight loss program. Use this chart from Kentucky Equine Research (click the link to download in full size) to help you become



Bearsted Road, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 5LH  
office@newnhamcourtequine.co.uk  
T:01622 734 884

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familiar with how to do it. You can always ask your vet to help show you when they are at the yard.

- Try to have the same person body condition score your horse each time so that you have a consistent record.
- A score of 5/9 is ideal in a normal healthy horse

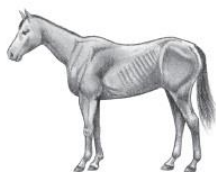
## Body Condition Score Chart

**Areas of emphasis for body condition scoring:** thickening of the neck, fat covering the withers, fat deposits along backbone, fat deposits on flanks, fat deposits on inner thighs, fat deposits around tailhead, fat deposits behind shoulders, fat covering ribs, shoulder blends into neck



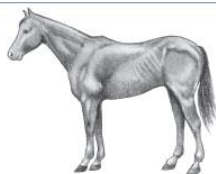
### 1 Poor

Animal extremely emaciated; spine, ribs, tailhead, points of hip and buttock projecting prominently; bone structure of withers, shoulders, and neck easily noticeable; no fatty tissue can be felt.



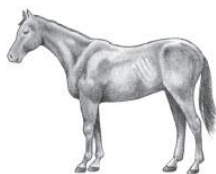
### 2 Very Thin

Animal emaciated; slight fat covering over base of spine; ribs, tailhead, points of hip and buttock prominent; withers, shoulders, and neck structure faintly discernable.



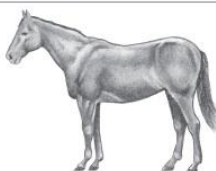
### 3 Thin

Fat buildup about halfway on spine; slight fat cover over ribs; spine and ribs easily discernable; tailhead prominent, but individual vertebrae cannot be identified visually; points of hip appear rounded but easily discernable; points of buttock not distinguishable; withers, shoulders, and neck accentuated.



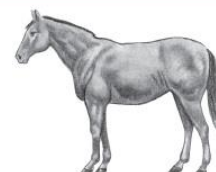
### 4 Moderately Thin

Slight ridge along back; faint outline of ribs discernable; tailhead prominence depends on conformation, fat can be felt around it; points of hip not discernable; withers, shoulders, and neck not obviously thin.



### 5 Moderate

Back is flat (no crease or ridge); ribs not visually distinguishable but easily felt; fat around tailhead beginning to feel spongy; withers appear rounded over spine; shoulders and neck blend smoothly into body.



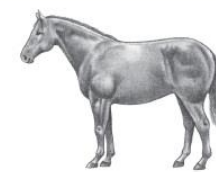
### 6 Moderately Fleshy

May have slight crease down back; fat over ribs fleshy/spongy; fat around tailhead soft; fat beginning to be deposited along sides of withers, behind shoulders, and along sides of neck.



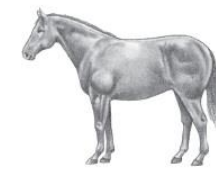
### 7 Fleshy

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.



### 8 Fat

Crease down back; difficult to feel ribs; fat around tailhead very soft; area along withers filled with fat; area behind shoulders filled with fat; noticeable thickening of neck; fat deposited along inner thighs.



### 9 Extremely Fat

Obvious crease down back; patchy fat appearing.

Kentucky Equine Research, 3910 Delaney Ferry Rd., Versailles, KY 40383, 859-873-1988, www.ker.com

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Bearsted Road, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 5LH  
office@newnhamcourtequine.co.uk  
T:01622 734 884