

# Cinder Hill Equine Clinic



## **Weight Management and Your Horse**

Our horse is an amazing product of evolution. Over thousands of years they have developed to survive on the sides of mountains with little food pursued by all sorts of predators. This means that they do a little too well when we provide them with a life of luxury, food brought to their door and minimal running requirements unless they are a racehorse in training. It's no surprise that obesity is a massive problem in our horses with around 50% of UK horses being overweight. As well as affecting their general wellbeing, obesity puts unnecessary strain on joints and tendons and can cause respiratory issues, metabolic problems, and can lead to laminitis.

### **How can I tell if my horse is overweight?**

Because horse size and shapes vary so much between breeds vets can't turn around and tell you exactly how heavy your horse ought to be, instead vets use a body condition score based on fat coverage over the horse's body.

As a rule of thumb, a horse with an ideal body condition score will have ribs and hip bones that are easy to feel but not obviously visible. In horses with a high body condition score, the ribs are hard to find, a crest develops along the top of the horse's neck, and the rear end develops a characteristic "apple shape". No longer a chunky horse, it's important that we recognise that these horses are overweight and this is a problem.

Although not 100% accurate, weight tapes can be useful to give you a more accurate idea of how your horses weight is changing along with Body Condition Scoring. Weigh bridges provide the most accurate body weight measurements. There is a weigh bridge at the clinic, or some feed companies offer weighing services at your yard.

### **Why does it matter if my horse is overweight?**

Many overweight horses and ponies will appear happy and continue to work at the level we require from them despite being overweight. This doesn't mean that their weight is not a problem. Overweight horses are at a higher risk of several health conditions such as laminitis, reduced exercise tolerance, colic due to lipomas (abnormal fat deposits in the abdomen), arthritis and insulin dysfunction. Some of these conditions may seem like they wouldn't cause serious problems but depending on severity all of them, can be life threatening and treatment may require a large amount of money and time.

### **How can I get my horse to lose weight?**

As a starting point, measure your horse's weight and body condition score so that you can monitor progress and do this every 2 weeks. Just like weight management in people there is no magic diet which will suit every horse and enable instant weight loss. Diet changed need to be made gradually aiming towards feeding your horse no more than 1.5% of their body weight in feed and forage daily

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(this includes all grass, hay, chaff and other feed). For a 300kg pony this works out as  $300 \times 1.5\% = 4.5\text{kg}$  but if you are currently feeding much more than this you will need to cut down gradually or you will be met with considerable resistance! Use a spring scale to weigh your hay nets (pre-soaked weight) and bucket feed. Weight loss requires hard work and a complete routine change for you and your horse and if there's anything horses hate its less food and a change of routine so if you're struggling, do talk to your vet to see if there's anything we can do to help.

## ***An example ration for a 300kg horse:***

This ration might be made up of:

Morning feed of chaff & feed balancer = 0.25kg

Morning hay net = 1.5kg

Lunchtime hay net = 1kg

Evening feed of chaff & feed balancer = 0.25kg

Evening hay net = 1.5kg

Total = 4.5kg

## ***Grazing and Turnout:***

Although on the one side we need to limit the amount your horse eats, all horses need to eat regularly for their digestive system to function normally, so we can't simply stop them eating grass. What we can do is to limit their access to grass and make it more difficult for them to eat as much as they want.

Grazing muzzles can be used to reduce the amount your horse can eat, fabric muzzles are better tolerated than the hard plastic muzzles but it is important to check your horse regularly to ensure the muzzle and horse are still together.

Another keyway to reduce the amount of grass your horse has access to is to strip grazing using electric tape to reduce the area of field available for your horse to eat from. If possible, using the tape in the centre of the field to make a track around the outside can be better than traditional strip grazing as it encourages your horse to move around more. Like the muzzle, you will need to check your horse regularly to ensure the electric tape and horse are where you left them.

## ***Supplementary Feed:***

Unless your horse is doing a lot of work, they don't need any supplementary feed. During the weight loss period, a combination of hay and low-calorie chaff should make up the bulk of your horse's diet. A low-calorie chaff can be used to reduce the jealousy when every other horse on the yard gets fed, encourage your horse to come in or to consume any medications you may have to give them. With reduced grass intake your horse may have reduced nutrient intake. There are some balancers designed specifically for horses on a weight loss diet or a vitamin and mineral supplement

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is recommended. Free access to a salt block and fresh water should be allowed at all times.

## ***Forage:***

Giving forage is important to maintain your horse's normal digestion and reduce gastric ulcers but many ponies and horses will inhale their haynet as fast as you can fill it. Using a spring weight scale (These are often designed for weighing suitcases) can help you manage how much forage your horse is getting and using small hole haynets or putting a second haynet on top of your filled haynet can slow down your horse meaning the forage will last a little longer.

Horses don't require high quality forage, for overweight horses haylage is too high in sugar and even normal hay may contain a high level of sugar. Soaking hay overnight or during the day for 6-8 hours can reduce the sugar content in the hay, although you need to ensure you pour away the water somewhere your horse won't try to drink it!

## ***Exercise***

This is the most important part of a weight loss programme. It's impossible to lose weight without putting in the effort. Much like the couch to 5k programme for people you need to start the increase in your horse's exercise gently otherwise it can be overwhelming. The more work your horse does the easier it will be to keep the weight down. This doesn't have to be ridden exercise, it can include lunging, long reining, loose schooling or just hand walking. The exercise should be active work and for a at least 20 minutes a day. If you are in any doubt as to whether your horse can be exercised or not, consult with your vet first.

## **I've done everything! Why isn't my horse losing any weight?**

If you've done everything you can think of to help your horse lose weight and they still seem to balloon in size every time a new blade of grass erupts in their paddock, then it is worth getting your vet involved to see if there is another reason why your horse isn't losing weight.

There are a few metabolic conditions which can make weight loss more difficult for our horses, your vet will examine your horse fully and take blood samples to measure the levels of hormone present in your horse's blood to rule out these conditions. The main conditions we consider in horses that struggle to lose weight are Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS) and Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction (Cushings). These conditions are covered in more detail in other articles.

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## Top tips for equine weight loss

- Soak hay in fresh water for at least 6 hours to reduce its calorie & sugar content.
- Divide the daily hay ration into as many separate meals as possible. If your horse is turned out onto a yard or bare paddock, hanging two separate hay nets up at opposite ends of the yard or paddock will help to mimic your horse's natural grazing pattern and encourage exercise.
- Double netting your hay will make holes smaller and so increase the time taken to eat the hay.
- If safe to do so, hanging a net of hay from the ceiling in the middle of the stable will make it harder for your horse to eat as they cannot push it against a wall to pull the hay out.
- Fibre cubes in a feed ball is a good way of relieving boredom and adding variety to the diet. Just make sure that you measure the weight of the fibre cubes and reduce the hay/chaff ration accordingly.
- Don't feed any treats!
- If your horse must be turned out on a grassy paddock, invest in a good sturdy grazing muzzle to limit the amount of grass eaten. If you find that your horse is not losing weight, the grazing may need to be restricted further or the hay ration reduced appropriately.
- Consider if your horse really does need a rug. Horses have waterproof coats and their own central heating systems. Digesting fibre burns calories and generates heat which helps them keep warm from the inside out.
- Don't 'crash diet' your horse. Horses must have a steady intake of food to keep them healthy, so you need to find ways of cutting down calories rather than significantly reducing quantity. Weight loss should be gradual and carefully planned.