

# SKINNY MINNIE OR PORKY PIG? IDEAL WEIGHT

PRACTICAL CONCEPTS FOR MAINTAINING YOUR HORSE'S CONDITION

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**Horses are very like people. Some can stay fat from the smell of an empty chaff bag, while others would seem to eat like a horse and never gain an ounce of weight. Trying to get weight on a poor doer to cover his bones would have to be one of the most annoying and distressing challenges you can face as a horse owner.**

On the other hand, a horse that is prone to carrying too much weight is subject to considerable health risks. Settling on the right diet for your "special needs" horse does not have to be frustrating or expensive.

Before treating the symptoms of your round or ribby friend, it is important to try and isolate the cause of his condition. This will assist you in selecting the correct solution from the enormous variety of feeds available. Today more of our horses are overweight than underweight. Some of us are guilty of killing our equine friends with kindness. We are determined to provide for their every need and this can translate into lots of rich food and not enough exercise.

It is a fact that many significantly underweight horses get there due to poor management and not by having a fussy metabolism. So before you buy up every last bale of Lucerne you can find, or take shares in a Sugar Beet company, it pays to understand why your horse has weight issues. Genetics will always play a role in size, shape and nature which in turn regulates metabolic rates but the conditions, level of exercise and overall health will also play a large role in which end of the spectrum he falls.

## Health:

In the case of the perpetually skinny horse, you first need to rule out any hidden health problems that might be causing his poor condition. Chronic illness, worms, teeth problems, gastric ulcers and stress will all lead to weight loss of some degree.

On the topic of where the feed is going, one of the best tips I have ever received was to feed little amounts more often. How tempting is it to present your skinny horse with an enormous feed. It certainly does wonders for your peace of mind but, hang on... a horse has a small stomach. In the wild he will eat little and often. It is much better to give him more small feeds through the day than one or two huge ones, where the bulk of the meal will pass through relatively untouched and end up feeding the birds. While this can



be tricky to achieve for those of us who also have day jobs, work out how you can split the rations into smaller feeds and sit back and enjoy the result!

## Weather:

Extra rations are necessary for warmth and in turn maintaining body weight in cold weather, particularly if wind and rain are added to the brew. The best plan is always to provide a warm, dry shelter and a good waterproof cover to protect your horse from the elements, in addition to extra rations to compensate for the inclement weather.

## Stress:

Stress is the often-unseen reason for a failure to regain weight. Many horses – particularly Thoroughbreds off the track, have developed chronic walking, weaving or fence running habits. They are needlessly burning calories all day long and all night too in some cases. In these instances, all that may be required is a simple management adjustment – give him a mate in the paddock or over the fence. Make sure he can see another horse if he is boxed or yarded. Stress can also be residual – as the result of an intensive ongoing training regime. Many horses develop gastric ulcers as a result, which will put them off their feed. If he looks hungry but isn't eating like a horse should or shows mild colic symptoms often,

you might want to ask your vet whether a stomach ulcer is likely.

Like people, horses sometimes need a break. If you think your horse is mentally tired from constant schooling, think about giving him some time off if possible or, at the very least, vary his workload and scenery. Learn the difference between exercise and work from his point of view.

## Overweight:

While an overweight horse doesn't hold the same level of frustration as a skinny horse, obesity can bring with it serious, potentially life threatening consequences. Laminitis or 'founder' is the most prevalent threat for overweight horses. A wobbly cresty neck, bubble butt and fat deposits around the withers and shoulders are red flags that you are close to tipping over the edge to founder. Excessively fat horses can also suffer from kidney or liver disease, as well as glucose intolerance.

If your horse gains weight suddenly and this is not related to any changes in feed or exercise, try reducing his feed in the first instance. If this has no effect, consult your vet, as it could be a symptom of a metabolic condition. Well managed diet (low starch/low sugar), exercise and, in some cases, medication can help alleviate this problem. Bear in mind that a potbelly may not be related to weight-gain, it could be a sign of a health condition such as a worm burden or even equine Cushing's disease.

## Basic Feed Requirements:

Achieving and retaining an ideal weight range in horses is the same principle as for humans – simple maths is involved. We need to find a balance between calories in, calories used and calories stored. It can take some experimenting to attain the right equilibrium. So called fattening feeds that mainly consist of carbohydrates and sugar -also known as sweet feeds - can lead to problems such as founder, colic or kidney strain. Conversely not enough calories can deprive your horse of vital nutrients and be the difference between winning and losing. Feeding a horse is part science and part intuition, your successful feeding programme will line up calorie input with energy output.

The basic feed requirement all horses have is the need for high quality roughage. We all know that horses are grazing animals that, in a natural environment, might graze up to 22 hours a day. It is very important to keep something in front of them to eat all day and this will also go a long way towards saving your fence posts, rails and trees! The way to prevent excessive weight gain throughout this all day smorgasbord is to carefully select your grass and hay types to suit.

The ideal level of crude protein for horse hay is roughly 10 to 12 percent. Lucerne

can contain as much as 24 percent protein; whereas some grass hays and some grain hays can fall as low as 6 to 8 percent protein. Adjusting the ratio of high and low-protein hays in response to the weight you desire is one of the easiest ways to maintain optimum weight.

A horse has been designed for non-stop grazing. Ideally, horses should consume between 1.5 percent to 2.5 percent of their body weight daily in fibre, roughage and feed. For an average 500 kg adult horse, this means between 7 to 13 kg per day. Feeding any less in a day is likely to disturb the digestive process, lead to nutrition imbalances and increase the possibility of colic.

## Gaining Weight Safely:

As the nutritional needs of your horse increase with exercise or other physiological demands, the concentrated feed department might now seem the sensible place to turn. With more digestible energy per kilo than hay, any grain or grain-based feed product obviously will provide more calories and energy per bite than hay or grass. Maize actually contains the highest energy levels on a per kilo basis, followed by Barley and Oats. These feed types are often mixed and Molasses can be added to reduce dust and tempt the equine palate. This further increases the amount of calories in the form of sugar (simple carbohydrates).

So it would seem easy. Just increase the grain levels until the weight piles on!

Not so. Are you aware that large amounts of grain-based feed can cause side effects ranging from disruptive to deadly?

Many horses will alter their temperament, for the worse, on too much grain. It is never a good plan to have them jumping out of their skins if you are trying to get them to concentrate while you are training them.

Even more significantly, studies have confirmed that the threat of colic increases with grain based intake. Laminitis, or founder, is also a greater risk with excessive grain. If that weren't enough, some horses seem incapable of digesting carbohydrates efficiently, resulting in leading to susceptibility for metabolic problems such "tying up."

## Weight Gain:

Hay - Lucerne hay is often employed to increase weight. Provided it is cut at either the beginning or the end of the growing season, the protein levels will be suitable for horses. Lucerne hay cut in the peak-growing season has protein levels, which are way too high, even when weight gain is the goal.

## Complete Feeds:

These are highly digestible processed feed products manufactured from a combination of chopped forage, grain, vitamins and minerals. Underweight horses will often benefit when a complete feed is added to their diet. It is important you use a complete feed that is

high in fibre and includes vitamins, minerals and fat. The term 'complete' should not be taken too literally – include either grass or hay in the mix to keep your horse occupied and also keep the gut active.

Some manufacturers also produce a feed particularly for older horses. These feeds are easily digested and often easier to chew as well. As geriatric equines typically struggle to hold their weight, especially in winter, these feeds often have a higher percentage of fats.

## Fat Fat Fat:

Ok, so you have followed all the suggestions above and your horse still resembles a toast rack. At this point it might be worth adding a weight gain supplement. The easiest way to do this is to add fat. Horses are able to use fat much better than humans and being carbohydrate free it does not increase the risks of colic or founder. As an added bonus you will get a lovely glossy coat!

The most economic way to add fat to the diet is by adding common vegetable oil. One cup of corn or safflower oil contains 240 grams of fat, the equivalent of half a kg of maize or three quarters of a kg of sweet feed. It can be used to substitute for part of the daily grain. It is not quite as good as Flaxseed oil and you need to store it in a cool place to avoid it going rancid.

## Digestion:

The horse's ability to gain and hold weight is also affected by the health of his digestive system. When this is not functioning correctly, the absorption and utilisation of nutrients is compromised. Probiotics and Prebiotics can assist the digestive tract to make the best use of the extra nutrients we are providing with our feeding programme.

## Weight Watchers:

To reduce weight, the first step is to remove any Lucerne and grain from the menu, feeding only grass and meadow hay. Combine this with a gradual and sensible increase in daily exercise, until body weight is at an acceptable level. As I said before, it is important not to deprive even the grossest horse of the minimum required daily amounts of roughage as this can lead to colic.

## Ongoing Maintenance:

Too fat, too thin or just right - it is still important to regularly assess your horse's condition through normal changes in the seasons, as his age progresses and with increased or reduced performance demands. Monitoring unexpected changes before they become impending health risks is a vital part of equine weight management and all part of horsemanship.

In order to keep your horse at his brilliant best, use a reasonable approach to your feeding programme that follows nature as much as practical and use appropriate advice and supplements as and when required.