

Improving Health in Overweight Equines

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Introduction



Figure 1. *Nearly Overweight Horse With a Light Workload, Scoring a BCS of 6 or 7*

Equine obesity is an increasingly recognized problem in highly developed countries. The term *overweight* often describes excess fat in equines. While the term *obese* typically refers to higher fat content and a more severe overweight condition, we use these terms interchangeably, as treatments for both conditions resemble one another. The primary treatments for overweight horses include diet modifications and incorporating exercise routines, with the most effective solution being a combination of both. There are special considerations and treatments for horses with **equine metabolic syndrome** (EMS), which is prevalent in obese equines.

Determining Body Condition



Figure 2. *Horse With a Healthy Weight for a Moderate Workload, Scoring a BCS of 5*

Obesity is a health problem in many horses worldwide, especially for equines in first-world countries. Approximately 30% of horses in these countries are obese.^{1,2} You can assess the degree of fat covering a horse using the objective **Henneke Body Condition Scoring** (BCS) system.³ Horses with a BCS of 7 or higher are considered obese.² Figure 1 shows a horse in light work on the verge of being overweight, scoring between a 6 and 7.

A score from 4 to 6 is generally accepted as healthy, depending on factors such as the horse's workload, the time of year, and the owner's goals. The Figure 2 photo shows a horse at a healthy weight for a moderate workload, scoring a 5.

A common sign of obesity is fatty deposits on the horse's neck and tail head.² Avoid focusing on the belly when evaluating BCS because this can vary with bloating, forage intake, and is an unreliable location for fat evaluation. Obesity can lead to many health problems, such as EMS, laminitis, and osteoarthritis, to name a few.² Proven solutions to equine obesity incorporate exercise and manage diet, with some special considerations for horses with EMS.^{1,2,4,5,6}

Managing Nutrition

Feeding 1.5% to 3% of a horse's body weight is a safe, recommended range. Speak with an equine nutritionist before feeding less than 1.5%.

Most horses are obese due to feed management styles.¹ To improve their health, feed proper rations while maintaining appropriate nutritional and energy needs.^{2,4,5} A feed analysis is recommended to help determine the energy and nutrients available in the feed and what

changes can aid in weight loss.¹ Adjustments can be made by reducing feed as low as 1.4% of body weight per day and can cause up to a 1% weight loss each week, but owners should speak with an equine nutritionist before feeding less than 1.5% body weight.^{1,2,5} Feeding a low total volume of forage is effective and shouldn't cause health problems like equine gastric ulcers.⁵ Feeding 1.5% to 3% of a horse's body weight is a safe, recommended range.

Owners can also change the type of feed to reduce how much energy a horse consumes. As hind-gut fermenters, horses require feed to be moving through their gastrointestinal (GI) system for the majority of the day to maintain digestive health and prevent **equine gastric ulcer syndrome (EGUS)**. To begin weight loss, the key is reducing energy consumption, while still meeting vitamin and mineral needs.¹ Providing a mineral supplement can help. It is crucial to continue meeting equine nutritional and forage requirements to prevent ulcers and maintain overall health but avoid feeding horses excess energy. Moreover, do not make diet changes too quickly, or ulcers may form.¹

Incorporating Exercise



Another effective solution for equine obesity is exercise.^{2,5,6} Reducing energy consumption in the diet combined with increased exercise can help horses lose weight and improve overall health.^{4,5} An example of an exercise program would be working horses 5 days per week for 20–30 minutes at varying gaits, depending on the horse's capacity.^{4,5} Exercise alone can improve a horse's health without any changes to diet.⁶ Owners shouldn't

worry that an increased workload will cause their horses to eat more and negate the positive effects of exercise.⁶ In addition to aiding in weight loss, exercise also improves cardiovascular function, reduces high blood pressure, and improves the diversity of the gut microbiome.⁵ Overall, the most effective method for weight loss is exercise combined with diet adjustments.^{4,5}

Diet and Exercise in Equines with Equine Metabolic Syndrome

When horses are fed excess energy without adequate energy expenditure, they are at risk of EMS. Horses with EMS often exhibit problems with insulin dysregulation.¹ The best way to improve health is by feeding less energy and implementing an exercise weight-loss routine. Medical treatments may also be helpful.² Owners should start with low levels of exercise and gradually increase to heavier exercise to prevent injury or other health problems.

In addition to exercise, proper nutrition is important for horses with EMS. As mentioned previously, a feed analysis is recommended.¹ For horses with EMS, aim specifically for a low percentage of nonstructural carbohydrates (NSC) in a feed analysis. Levels of NSC above 10% in an overweight equine's diet are detrimental to weight loss.² NSC levels can be reduced by soaking hay for several hours; however, this can make the hay unpalatable for some horses. Weight loss can be difficult for horses with insulin dysregulation, so working with a veterinarian is advised.²

Conclusion

To summarize, equine obesity is a problem, specifically in countries like the USA.¹ Proper management is crucial in achieving a healthy weight in every horse.² Once an overweight horse is identified by using the Henneke BCS system, make changes to the equine's diet and exercise routine. Although the best methods vary from horse to horse, especially depending on a diagnosis like EMS, managing energy intake is a great way to help a horse lose weight. Give careful attention to ensure the diet meets other nutritional requirements. Incorporating an exercise routine is fundamental in improving horse health. Exercise can improve weight, cardiovascular function, gut health, and blood pressure. Combine nutrition and exercise for the best health results in combating obesity in equines.^{4,5}

References

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