

Slimming the Fat Horse

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When a horse's ration is highly palatable and contains excess energy in relation to its needs, and exercise is restricted, a confined, idle horse will consume more than it needs and become overweight. Horses are always hungry and those used for showing or weekend pleasure riding in urban areas are often confined to stables or small yards for most of the week. There is a temptation to provide more feed than required relative to the horse's needs to keep the animal occupied and contented.

The condition of a horse should be evaluated relative to its size, breed, build and skeletal structure, as well as its purpose. In working horses, an optimum condition score should be decided upon, and the dietary plan introduced over a 7 - 10 day period.

Certain breeds, such as Quarter Horses and Warmbloods, and many pony breeds, tend to be "good doers", or "hooverers" which pick and graze all day. They do not need the same amount of feed and energy intake for exercise and to maintain optimum condition. Often show standards require a horse to be in a "fleshy" to fat condition. Heavy conditioning can be an on-going problem in a "good doer", a greedy horse, or a horse provided with a ration containing excess energy to its needs, often without regular or adequate exercise.

An overweight horse is more likely to be physically challenged and sweat more if exercised and can be more easily stressed by hot weather.

It is inhumane and unwise to deny a horse feed in an attempt to make it lose weight. The restriction of energy and the program of weight reduction should be gradual, combining both a decrease in dietary energy levels and controlled, but not excessive, slow aerobic exercise to utilise body fat stores as an energy source. It is best to give two or three short periods of medium exercise, rather than hard or extended work. Ensure adequate water is provided at all times, because an overweight horse will usually sweat more heavily when worked.

Pastured Horses

In pastured horses, restricting grazing to one hour each morning and evening, with confinement to a yard for the remainder of the time, and provision of 300g per 100kg body weight of dampened hay morning and evening, will normally help to reduce condition. Unfortunately, an over-weight horse left to graze, even on an eaten out or sparse pasture, will continue to forage or "hoover" most of the time as a matter of habit. This will not only damage the pasture, but results in slower weight reduction. A gradual increase in walk and trot exercise for 10-20 minutes twice daily, until the horse starts to sweat, either under saddle or on the lunge for 3-4 minutes daily over a 10-14 day period, will help to reduce excess condition.

Note: Remember to discard the soaking water! Soaking hay to reduce its fructan sugar and soluble carbohydrate content is important to help reduce the risk of laminitis or founder in an overweight aged pony, or a horse with Cushing's Disease (Refer to Fact Sheet C3). If all the hay is soaked to reduce sugars, many soluble minerals, trace-minerals and vitamins will also be leached out in the soaking water.

Handy Hint

Do Not Starve an Over-weight Pony

An over-weight pony, in particular, must not be starved by sudden withdrawal of feed. Ponies, and some Thoroughbreds, can develop the often fatal **hyperlipaemia syndrome** when their nutritional intake is reduced suddenly. When feed is suddenly restricted or they are accidentally starved, their bodies mobilise fat reserves for energy. A genetic abnormality leads to the development of a complex lipo-protein compound in the liver which cannot be metabolised. This condition can be fatal in 10-12 days, often despite recognition and treatment.

Note: This condition can be triggered within 8-12 hours in a fat pony when feed is not available during long distance travelling, after snowfalls, bushfires, or very wet weather which restricts grazing, severe lameness including laminitis which also limits grazing and colic. Pregnant pony mares in the last 3 months before foaling increase their needs for glucose to develop the unborn foal in late pregnancy and they will mobilise fat reserves to provide energy. **Refer to Fact sheet C12 for full details on Hyperlipaemia.**

Handy Hint

Soak Hay to Reduce Energy Content

Soaking biscuit(s) of hay in luke-warm water for 60 minutes, then remove to drain and air dry for 30-40 minutes before feeding, will leach out a significant amount of soluble sugars and reduce the overall energy content of the hay.

Hay can be soaked in the morning, then allowed to drain and air dry for the night feeding, and overnight for the morning feed, but do not soak and leave the hay damp for more than 12 hours before feeding as it may develop toxic mould which could lead to colic.

Stabled Horses

In most cases, confinement to a stable with sawdust rather than straw bedding, so that the horse cannot 'snack' on bedding when it gets hungry, or a bare sheltered outside yard (not sandy) provides better control of the dietary intake of an over-weight horse.

Initially, the energy content in the ration should be reduced in a step-wise manner over 7-10 days by providing at least 65 - 70% dampened chaff and hay. The ration must still provide adequate protein, fibre, mineral and vitamin levels to meet maintenance requirements. Ideally, the smaller bulk of ration should be fed over 3-4 feeds, with access to water at all times.

A suitable dieting ration per **100kg body weight** can be mixed as follows, and offered 3 times daily:

- ½ litre (60g) lucerne chaff (Energy, protein, fibre)
- ¼ cup (30g) sunflower seed or full fat soyabean meal (Energy, protein)
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon calcium trace-mineral and vitamin supplement – eg 10g/100kg body weight of **Kohnke's Own Cell-Provide®**.

Horses must obtain their protein and fat needs from the diet as they are unable to efficiently utilise protein produced by microbes which ferment fibre in the hindgut. Other vitamins, such as vitamin A and vitamin E must be provided in the diet, as carotene, the precursor compound for vitamin A synthesis, and vitamin E, may be in less than required amounts in a restricted ration intake or a 'Jenny Craig' paddock.

Handy Hint

Replace Nutrients Lost in Soaked Hay

The losses of calcium and bone minerals, essential trace-minerals and vitamins can be made up by adding the recommended supplement dose of **Kohnke's Own Cell-Provide®** or **Aussie Sport™** each day. Omega fatty acids, provided by **Kohnke's Own Energy-Gold®** oil, which also contributes Vitamin-E, will help ensure coat condition.

Handy Hint

Avoid Weight Reduction in Mares Prior to Breeding

Do not put overweight mares that are to be bred within the following 4-6 weeks or a mare during the first three months of pregnancy, on a weight reducing diet. It is best to feed to maintain a steady body weight, otherwise fertility may be affected and a mare in early pregnancy may abort her foal if her nutritional intake (energy) is reduced to less than 60% for 4 consecutive days during the first 90 days of pregnancy.

Ensure that a supply of fresh, clean water is available at all times to any horse on a weight reduction diet.

It is important with any dieting plan to feed small amounts often, to relieve boredom and maintain adequate digestive function.

A recommended dose of a vitamin and mineral mix, such as **Kohnke's Own Cell-Provide®**, or **Aussi-Sport™** should be included in the evening feed to provide essential fat soluble and B complex vitamins on the high roughage diet.

The evening feed may be bulked out with ½ litre (70g) of cereal chaff, and sweetened with a tablespoon of molasses mixed 50:50 in warm water or preferably 50 mL apple cider diluted to double its volume with water to improve acceptance of the chaff based feed per 100kg body weight. If available, 1kg of green feed per 300kg body weight provided overnight will help to maintain the interest in the bland diet and reduce boredom and related vices such as crib biting. A plastic bucket or other stable "toy" hung from the rafters may help occupy the extra leisure time between meals.

A pony at rest will usually eat more than it needs of a feed it finds palatable, and is liable to put on weight. When exercised regularly, a pony will normally only eat sufficient to meet its energy needs and maintain body weight.

Handy Hint

Supplement with Nutrients to aid Weight Loss.

Horses on a low calorie, weight reduction diet can benefit from supplementation with specific nutrients which have a role in glucose metabolism and fat 'burning'. A daily supplement of **Kohnke's Own Trim®** will assist the low calorie diet by maintaining normal sugar metabolism and fat utilisation for energy to help weight loss in over-weight horses or those with 'cresty' neck and a high risk of laminitis.

Trim® should be supplemented at the recommended dose with low calorie feeds, such as sugar beet fibre and soaked hay, given as 2-3 small feeds per day until the animal starts to trim down and its 'crest' and tail-butt fat deposits are softened and reduced. Check the firmness of the neck crest and tail -butt fat on a weekly basis. Once the animal has reached a moderate body weight, the dose of **Trim®** can be reduced to once daily and withdrawn if the animal maintains its trimmed down condition.

However, it is important to monitor the animal's condition and limit its pasture and feed intake, as well as ensure regular exercise to help maintain the trim condition. Using a grazing muzzle during periods of rapid pasture growth may be necessary and re-introducing **Trim®** and a low calorie diet may help avoid the over-weight condition and the risk of laminitis or founder.

Once the horse has reached its condition target, then it is important to maintain it by controlled feeding and exercise. Often, despite a successful reduction in weight, a 'good doer' or a "hoover" will quickly regain the weight lost, unless carefully managed.



Left: A dangerously overweight horse. Right: The same horse 3 weeks after being started on a weight management diet, showing a marked improvement in health and it is well on the way to reaching its condition target..

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