



## Is My Horse Too Fat?

### Why Weight Matters and 10 Tips to Help

Feeding can be one of the most rewarding bonding experiences between horse and owner. However, if given the chance, many horses will eat far more than they metabolically need. No matter how much your horse enjoys eating, you do a disservice by overfeeding. Excessive body fat will stress every system in the body. The potential negative effects of extra weight include strain on the cardiovascular system (heart and lungs), increased risk of orthopedic disease both in young horses (developmental bone and joint disease) and worsening arthritis in adult horses, increased risk of laminitis/founder, less efficient cooling of body temperature (increased risk of heat stress), decreased liver and kidney function, reduced reproductive efficiency and exercise intolerance.

Determining your horse's ideal weight is a subjective exercise. The use of your horse partially dictates how your horse should look. For example, a competitive endurance horse or race horse is usually leaner than a show-ready halter horse. For more information on how to body condition your horse, please visit the University of Kentucky's [website](#). A body condition score of 5-6 out of 9 is typically ideal, keeping in mind the specific physical demands of your chosen event. If your horse is an 8 or 9, he/she is definitely a candidate for a weight loss program.

When beginning your overweight horse on a weight loss program, it is important to make all changes gradually and under the supervision of your vet. Follow these helpful guidelines from the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) to get you started:

1. Be patient. Weight loss should be a slow, steady process so as not to stress the horse or create metabolic upsets.
2. Make changes in both the type and amount of feed gradually. Reduce rations by no more than 10% over a 7- to 10-day period.
3. Track your horse's progress by using a weight tape. When the horse's weight plateaus, gradually cut back the ration again.
4. Step up the horse's exercise regimen. Gradually build time and intensity as the horse's fitness improves.
5. Provide plenty of clean, fresh water so the horse's digestive and other systems function as efficiently as possible and rid the body of metabolic and other wastes.
6. Select feeds that provide plenty of high quality fiber but are low in total energy. Measure feeds by weight rather than by volume to determine appropriate rations.



7. Select feeds that are lower in fat since fat is an energy-dense nutrient source.
8. Switch or reduce the amount of alfalfa hay fed. Replace with a mature grass or oat hay to reduce caloric intake.
9. Feed separate from other horses so the overweight horse doesn't have a chance to eat his portion and his neighbor's too. In extreme cases of obesity, caloric intake may also need to be controlled by limiting pasture intake.
10. Balance the horse's diet based on age and activity level. Make sure the horse's vitamin, mineral and protein requirements continue to be met. Always provide free choice salt and mineral blocks.

Once your horse has reached an ideal body condition, you will probably need to readjust your horse's ration to stabilize his weight. Exercise is and will be extremely important in maintaining your horse's fitness. It is important to schedule regular check-ups with your veterinarian, especially during the weight-loss period.

For more information about caring for the obese horse, ask your vet or visit the AAEP's horse health website, [www.myHorseMatters.com](http://www.myHorseMatters.com)