

# how to achieve weight loss



Horses have evolved to graze up to 22 hours per day and, in the wild can typically cover 20 miles per day in search of fresh grazing and water. This serves as a good reference point for what a healthy horse can accommodate under natural conditions and why, in domesticated conditions, management often leads to weight gain. This also highlights that exercise plays an essential role in any weight loss regime.

## Is my horse fat?

First things first, we need to establish whether the horse is fat and, if so, how fat! The difficulty with many methods such as weighttapes, formulas and weighbridges is that they just provide you with a number. This number then needs to be put into context as, on its own, it tells us very little. Just like in humans, weight on a set of scales, for example, is not only reflective of body fat but also muscle (which, incidentally, weighs more than fat), hydration status, gut fill and amount of bone (density). As such, you can imagine how any slight change in reading could be misleading.

The best method to ascertain a horse's fat distribution is body condition scoring (BCS), also known as fat-scoring, where the fat covering of the horse is palpated, visually assessed and given a score. The 0-9 system incorporates more areas for evaluation and more increments upon which to score. This system involves scoring 6 areas (neck, withers, back, tail-head, ribs and behind the shoulder) from which an average is taken to obtain the overall BCS.

With regards to what is considered a healthy BCS, this varies depending on the scale used, personal perception, health considerations and purpose of the horse. It is generally perceived that between 4 and 6 on a scale of 0-9 is ideal.

## How did we get here?

Generally speaking, weight gain occurs where a horse's nutritional intake is greater than the physical energy demand, however there are a number of factors which can intensify this process, like changes in food availability or activity levels and genetic influences. A lack of knowledge or appreciation of how the horse has evolved may also be to blame. Unlike its feral counterpart most domestic horses undergo minimal

work yet are receiving a relative abundance of forage, provision of shelter and rugs resulting in increased calorie consumption and reduced calorie burning. This is intensified by the animals' naturally adaptive behaviour of building up stores of body fat in the summer as a buffer against the 'inevitable' shortage of winter feedstuffs.

As the majority of the horse's diet should be comprised of forage, this is likely to be the main source of calories. Since the majority of leisure horses (in rest to light work) consume sufficient calories from their forage alone to maintain weight (in many cases concentrate feed just serving the purpose of balancing the forage), this is where the focus should start when considering weight loss.

A misjudgement of workload may also be a factor. Recommended amounts of concentrate feed are typically based on bodyweight and workload – as such,



if the workload is overestimated, this can result in an oversupply of calories/energy.

The use of rugs, stables and winter feed all offset the natural winter weight loss which horses and ponies have evolved to do. Over a number of seasons this weight accumulation can cause a horse or pony to go from moderate fatness to obese.

### HOW TO GET WEIGHT LOSS

Forage should still represent the majority of the good-doer's diet but the difficulty with forage is that it is much trickier to assess its calorie content and

how much is being consumed, particularly with grass. Forage analysis may reveal part of the picture but can be expensive and will only represent a snapshot in time and therefore may be misleading. One thing that you can do is opt for a later cut hay or haylage which tends to be coarser and stalkier, contains a larger percentage of indigestible fibre and therefore fewer calories.

It is rare to be able to feed ad lib forage to a good-doer and, as a general rule, for weight loss we would look at providing a total daily intake of the equivalent of 1.5% of ideal bodyweight of forage and concentrates combined. Reducing to this amount should be achieved gradually. When it comes to grazing, you have a number of options. As research shows that stabling for a period of time and then turning out is ineffective – the horse/pony adapting and increasing his intake accordingly - we have to look to other strategies to promote movement and increase chew time while reducing calorie intake.

### Strip grazing

Offers a relatively easy way to control consumption of grass. A 'forward fence' and a 'back fence' provide controlled amounts of fresh grass whilst also allowing grazed pasture to recover. Overgrazing can expose plant crowns, containing higher levels of sugar and starch, as well as preventing effective regrowth. Moving the forward fence as a whole, having the water trough at the opposite end to fresh grass, an L or U shaped paddock, or natural obstacles will all encourage movement.

### Grazing Muzzles

Can help to control bite size, and in doing so reduce intake by up to 80%, but must be used with care and be introduced slowly. Most manufacturers recommend grass is at least 2 inches long and that the muzzle is not worn more than 12 hours a day. Bare paddock turnout/stabling can be utilised in conjunction with suitable hay/haylage to reduce calorie intake. This is ideally combined with a grazing muzzle during the time spent at grass to prevent horses compensating for reduced time at pasture.

Extending chew time, and therefore the amount of time the horse is occupied, is key to effective and safe weight loss. Good-doers therefore need strategies to control the quantity of forage they eat AND prolong its consumption.

- Use small holed nets, or simply double net haylage nets.
- Use a number of haynets at different points around the stable
- Use different fibre types (hay /chaff /Beet) to encourage natural foraging behaviour
- Use feed balls to entertain while also ensuring a steady trickle of fibre
- Use compressed fibre blocks

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### Energy and Calories, one and the same – how to achieve one without the other

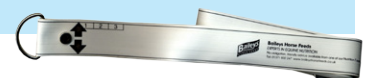
When looking at appropriate concentrate feeds there are two main factors to consider; calorie level and how much by weight is fed. The calorie level of a feed is described by the Digestible Energy (DE), which is the measure of the estimated energy/calorie content. When assessing calorie contribution, it is important that you are aware of both the calorie level AND the weight of the feed being provided.

For example:

2kg of High Fibre Cubes @ 8MJ/Kg  
= 16MJ per day

0.45kg of Lo-Cal Balancer @ 11MJ/Kg  
= 4.95MJ per day

In order to ensure a balanced diet while encouraging weight loss, your horse must be fed the full recommended amount for bodyweight and workload. A product designed to be fed by the Stubbs scoop will not deliver a balanced diet when fed by the hand or mug full.



For further information or a practical and individual diet for your horse, contact one of Baileys Nutrition team on 01371 850 247 (option 2)  
e: [nutrition@baileyshorsefeeds.co.uk](mailto:nutrition@baileyshorsefeeds.co.uk)  
[www.baileyshorsefeeds.co.uk](http://www.baileyshorsefeeds.co.uk)