

## Losing weight - seven keys to an effective diet

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In some circumstances, it can be important for your horse to lose weight. Being overweight increases the risk of lameness and encourages the onset of certain diseases. It is important to take care of an overweight horse quickly so as not to endanger its health. Although some breeds are predisposed to being overweight because of their rustic nature, the same protocol applies to all horses and allows effective action to be taken. Here are some golden rules to follow.

by **Pauline DOLIGEZ, Nelly GENOUX** | 05.02.2018 |

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Technical level   



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### Monitor the condition of your horse

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#### Why?

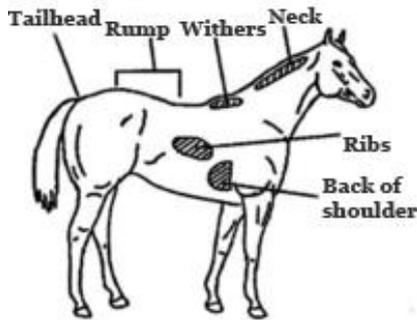
The digestive physiology of horses is adapted to a diet that is low in energy and high in fibre. In the wild, the horses graze on small quantities of grass throughout the day (15 hours a day). By making them sedentary, domestication



Pony affected by EMS: fatty deposits can be observed around the girth © M. Sabbagh

has greatly influenced their feeding behaviour. Limited space, access to food which is of too high quality and/or quantity and lack of exercise all encourage weight gain. Being overweight is very bad for the general health of the horse. It is a risk factor that can lead to the development of certain diseases: laminitis, insulin resistance, Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS), cardiovascular disease, osteochondrosis in young horses, colic, reduced fertility...

## How?



Different zones to be observed during body condition scoring

Regularly checking a horse's body condition (once a month) ensures that the horse is not overweight and, if necessary, you can act quickly to remedy the situation. IFCE offers two free online simulation tools for estimating your horse's weight.

- **The fat cover category**, using a body condition score (known in French as an NEC score) is carried out by observing and palpating six areas of the animal's body: its neck, withers, back of shoulder, ribs, rump and tailhead.

Ideally, the horse should have a NEC of between 2.5 and 3.5 (optimum NEC) to stay healthy. The animal is considered to be overweight if it has a NEC greater than 4.



- The **body weight**, based on measurements of thoracic circumference (using a metric tape) and height at withers (measuring rod). If you own scales, these are also very useful.



Thoracic circumference measurement using a metric tape © J. Ketterlé



Measurement of height at withers using a measuring rod © L. Marnay-Le-Masne

## Avoid concentrates to make your horse lose weight

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**Fat horses**, especially those which are resting, or which do little exercise, do **not need energy**. It is, therefore, unnecessary to provide these categories of horses with energy supplements. For overweight horses with higher requirements (growth/gestation/lactation/sport), it is necessary to adjust their intake of concentrates.

However, a **vitamin-rich mineral feed** (VM) and a **salt stone should not be overlooked**, in order to rebalance any deficits in the forage.

## Distributing fibre-rich forages

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*Fibrous hay © N. Genoux*

A feed based on low energy (sugar/starch) fibrous forage is the key to an effective diet to make your horse lose weight.

The more mature the grass is, the more fibre it contains and the lower its nutritional value (sugar/protein content).

Therefore, opt for a daily intake of late harvested hay when the ears are just forming (mid-June/July), of 1.0-1.5% of the horse's live weight (in kg dry matter)



Poor forage ≠ forage which is in poor condition!

Giving fibrous hay with a low nutritional value to an overweight horse does not mean that you should overlook quality. Check that there is no dust and mould.

## Controlling access to pasture

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The aim is **to limit the intake of fresh grass**, especially in spring and autumn, when the young grass is very rich. To do so, overweight horses must be kept in a bare paddock or with little grass.

Several solutions are possible:

- Limit grazing in areas in the deciduous stage (5-15cm) where the grass is too rich. Move the area available to the horse, for example with an electric wire, offering it a reduced area of fresh grass each day.
- Allow it to graze on areas at an advanced vegetative stage (when the grass is more fibrous and therefore less rich).
- Allow them to graze on areas which are overgrazed.
- Allow overweight horses to graze after horses with greater requirements or other animals. The horse will then be obliged to nibble at what the others have refused, tall grass in an advanced vegetative stage, rich in cellulose and poor in sugars/proteins.



As what is available is reduced, the horses look for food and start eating other vegetation. Remember to check the condition of the fences to prevent horses from running away and check there are no toxic trees/hedges/plants to limit the risk of poisoning.

## Slow down ingestion

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Use equipment such as slow feeders, hay nets, muzzles... and divide the distribution of forage throughout the day to promote chewing, salivation and therefore good digestion

## Getting Exercise

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Obese horses find it difficult to exercise because they lack physical condition and have no energy! They therefore need regular physical activity, albeit moderate and adapted, in order to get back into shape.



Classic mistakes to avoid:

- Do not give concentrates to an overweight horse, even after exercise.
- Do not feed oats to an overweight horse because you think they are lacking energy.
- Do not give sweet treats (sweets, sugar cubes, etc.). Instead, offer apples and carrots, which have a limited sugar-to-water ratio.

## Adapting to the seasons

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**In spring and autumn**, pay attention to the richness of the grass and how much is on offer.

Approach **winter** as the horse would in the wild, i.e. without a blanket. The cold will naturally make the horse burn fat, so lose weight. Consider limiting/delaying adding hay in early winter.

### About our writers

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