

Information For Clients:



Obesity & Dieting Your Horse or Pony

Obesity is increasingly recognized as a serious health problem in horses and ponies. It has long been recognized as contributing to laminitis. More recently equine metabolic syndrome (EMS) has been diagnosed in an increasing number of animals and the commonest reason for colic surgery at The Barn is a strangulating lipoma. These are fatty growths, more common in obese animals, which strangulate and choke off the blood supply and kill a section of gut, which then has to be cut out and the ends rejoined! Lameness can also be caused or made worse by overweight bodies putting excess strain on the limbs. These are all good reasons to control weight.

Obesity can be difficult to assess and should not be confused with a "grass belly", which is an abdomen full of fermenting grass and gas. To assess the degree of fatness you need to get your hands on the horse or pony. Feel the ribs. These should be obvious with light finger pressure and covered by a layer of fat less than 1cm thick under the skin. One inch (2 ½ cm) is too fat! Other places where fat is laid down is the crest, shoulder blades and sheath in geldings or in mares just in front of the udder. As owners we see our horses every day and it may be difficult to notice whether an animal is gaining or losing weight. A weigh band should be placed around the horse's or pony's heart girth (just behind the elbows) every week or fortnight and the measurements recorded so that trends may be seen and food offered or grazing given altered accordingly.

Good doers especially native breeds of pony should not be given unlimited access to good quality grazing. On such pasture some animals will continue to gain weight with as little as three hours grazing daily and no other food! These animals need a limited area otherwise known as a starvation paddock (perhaps made by the erection of an electric fence). The aim is not to starve the animal. The area suitable may vary from ¼ of an acre of very good quality pasture per Shetland during the whole summer to ¾ of an acre for a Cob. Do not move to another starvation paddock when the grass is short these areas are for the whole grass growing season. The grass will still be growing and producing food at the same rate as you lawn, which needs cutting every week to keep it short. Larger areas can be made available in winter or when grass has browned off in the summer but beware of Spring AND Autumn flushes of grass. A word of warning! Electric fences should not continually be moved back once the area available has reached the sizes recommended above, otherwise a fresh strip will be provided every day in addition to the grass being produced and eaten by the area strip grazed over previous week.

Muzzles are generally disliked by owners but surprisingly well tolerated by ponies and highly recommended. When a starvation paddock is not available then a muzzle has several advantages over stabling an animal for large parts of the day. Horses and ponies are herd animals and prefer being out with their herd mates to being in by themselves (in solitary confinement!). Out in the field animals exercise themselves as they move around and most seem happy to eat a blade at a time through the holes in the bottom of the muzzle. However, some ponies will be quite ingenious at removing the muzzles if not securely fastened.

Remember it is usually the amount of grass or hay / haylage that puts on weight rather than the amount of bucket food and exercise is also invaluable in controlling weight!

Good Luck!



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