



Information For Clients:

Laminitis and Obesity

The vast majority of cases of laminitis are due to a combination of obesity and access to too much quality grazing. 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 1/2cm) is too fat! Other places where fat is laid down is the crest, shoulder blades and sheath 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 useful tip is to put a weighband or even a tape measure around the horse or pony's heart girth (just behind the elbows) every fortnight and to record the measurements 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 1/4 of an acre of very good quality pasture per Shetland during the whole summer to 3/4 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 your 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. 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.

Some cases of laminitis are not due to obesity or overeating grass. Other causes include Cushing's Disease or other hormonal problems, which we are able to diagnose with blood tests. Infection, especially uterine infection after foaling, often associated with a retained afterbirth, can also be a cause of laminitis but this is relatively rare. Misuse of steroid drugs, stress, poor foot trimming (especially in animals which have had laminitis previously) and mechanical stress/trauma are other less common causes.

However, do remember that most cases are due to overfeeding in either the long term (obesity) or short term (grass laminitis) and recurrence can be prevented by good management.

Good Luck!





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