

Body building

A common worry for owners in the winter months is horses dropping condition. We've asked equine nutritionists for their best tips to tackle the issue

OUR EXPERT

Clare Barfoot



Clare is a registered equine nutritionist and research and development manager for Spillers. She has specialist knowledge of laminitis. Visit: www.spillers-feeds.com.

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Alexandra Wesker



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Liz Bulbrook



Liz BSc (Hons) is the director of nutrition at Baileys Horse Feeds and works closely with many top riders and trainers. Visit: www.baileyshorsefeeds.co.uk.



Condition scoring

"Condition is just a description of fat covering, therefore the best way to assess whether or not your horse is overweight is to condition score him," says Clare.

"Condition scoring is a more objective way of determining fat covering at specific points across the body, such as the crest, withers, shoulder, ribs, loins and tail head.

"On the one to nine scale, five is ideal. If your horse is creeping up past six, it is time to review his diet."

As the days start to get longer, many riders will increase their horse's workload, aiming to build up fitness and body condition in preparation for a busy summer of competing or longer hacks.

A horse who has been well prepared for the tasks he's required to do will not only perform better, but will have more chance of staying sound and healthy during the months ahead.

While many owners pay close attention to their horse's exercise programme, a balanced diet is also a key factor in aiding performance.

Choosing the right feed for your horse will help to keep his body condition at the correct

levels. But what does the term body condition mean and how do we know we've got it right?

What is body condition?

"A horse's condition is determined by his level of muscle development and topline (the muscles over the neck, back and quarters), and by his bodyweight and the amount of fat covering the neck, ribs and quarters," says Dodson & Horrell's veterinary surgeon Chloe.

"A horse in good condition should have well-developed muscles and have the ribs just covered so you can feel them, but not see them."

According to Spillers' nutritionist Clare Barfoot, condition can mean different things

to different people. "However, body condition scoring systems (see box, right) are a measure of fat coverage, not muscle tone," she says.

"As well as having adequate muscle development, a horse in good condition should have enough body reserves to maintain health. Having a horse that is too thin or overweight is not healthy.

"In order to perform to the best of his ability, a horse should be well muscled and have enough reserves to fuel his performance and keep his immune system healthy.

"However, if he is carrying too much condition it puts excess strain on his joints or slows him down."

How to provide condition

"A higher workload means an increase in energy usage and, accordingly, an increase in energy requirement," says independent equine nutritionist Alexandra Wesker. "When you 'up' your horse's exercise, he needs to develop muscle tone and therefore dietary protein might have to be increased.

"To keep your horse's diet consistent and support his gut health, you can look for a roughage [forage] that provides more energy than your horse's current intake.

"Roughages that provide more energy tend to offer higher levels of protein and minerals as well.

"You can have your hay or haylage analysed to check its nutritional content. Maybe all your horse needs alongside this is a salt lick!

"To boost body fat, the energy in the diet needs to outweigh the energy used. This can be done by increasing the amount of energy in the diet, or by decreasing energy usage (by training less, for example).

"Assuming you want to keep your training the same, the best way to raise fat mass is by increasing dietary energy.

"Try to feed this energy through oil and fat, and keep dietary sugar and starch low.

"To develop muscle, the diet needs to provide high-quality protein. Protein consists of amino



Horse sense Nutrition

acids and is considered high-quality if it offers the whole array of amino acids, in a good ratio.

“Such high-quality protein can be found in roughage, especially fresh spring grass, or in protein supplements.

“In order to support muscle growth, dietary protein needs to meet nutritional requirements. Feeding excess protein, however, does not further enhance muscle growth.

“What does enhance muscle development is strength training – dietary protein just needs to be there to allow it to happen.”

“It is calories (energy) that contribute to condition in terms of fat reserves. However, to build muscle and topline a balanced diet that supplies good quality protein and exercise is essential,” adds Clare.

“Providing optimal levels of vitamins and minerals is another essential part of any horse’s diet,” says Chloe. “We also need to provide plenty of amino acids, in particular lysine.

“Lysine is essential to the growth and development of muscle cells and protein. If the horse does not have enough lysine he will not be able to develop his topline and condition.

“Lysine is present in ingredients such as alfalfa and soya, and it should be found at optimal levels in good quality balancers and performance feeds.

“Using a balancer, designed to promote muscle growth and development, will help your horse gain condition without excess calories.”

Check for yourself

“There are multiple areas on the body to check the amount of fat your horse carries,” says Alexandra. “The main area to check is the ribs.

“If you can clearly see your horse’s ribs, he may be underweight, but if you can’t see them, he may be overweight. If you can see a faint outline of the ribs in the right light, then he may have a healthy weight.

“Have a feel to see if you can find them. Run your fingers across the middle of the ribcage in the direction the hair grows, from front to back.

“If you can feel the ribs with light pressure (when the skin under your nails turns a milky colour), then your horse may have a healthy weight. If you can’t feel them at all, your horse is likely to be overweight.

“This is a very simple assessment of body condition. A proper assessment requires more steps and I recommend reading books or looking at online tutorials for more help.”

“It takes a lot of time and effort for a horse to build muscle and condition,” says Chloe.

“In fact, trying to ‘bulk up’ too quickly can be detrimental to your horse’s health. Instead, we should aim for a slow, steady development of musculature, through regular strengthening exercises and the correct diet.” ■



The main area to check for body fat is over ribs

Top feeding tips

- “Ensure your horse is receiving plenty of fibre from grass, hay or haylage to keep his hindgut healthy.”

Chloe Casalis de Pury

- “Make dietary changes gradually to support gut health and help prevent the development of laminitis or colic.”

Alexandra Wesker

- “The old wives’ tale of needing fat to ‘turn into’ muscle is false. It isn’t physically possible and excess fat is always detrimental to your horse’s health.”

Chloe Casalis de Pury

- “Choose specially formulated conditioning feeds to promote or maintain condition, as these will be more effective than simply feeding more of your existing feed or adding straights, such as barley.”

Liz Bulbrook

- “Take photos of your horse every two weeks and compare the outline of his neck, back and quarters. You should find that as your horse gains condition, he gets fitter and finds strengthening exercise easier.”

Chloe Casalis de Pury

- “Sweat loss means your horse will lose minerals and therefore supplementation with electrolytes may be required.”

Alexandra Wesker



Amino acids help support ligaments, tendons and joints



Oil is a useful source of low-starch calories

- “Never push your horse too hard and make sure you leave a gap of two days between strengthening exercises, such as hill work, cavaletti or jumping. Use these days for fitness or skills training instead.”

Chloe Casalis de Pury

- “A ‘slosh’ of oil will help to improve coat shine but 250-500ml is necessary to make a significant calorie contribution. High oil supplements offer a mess-free alternative and some contain supporting antioxidants to help the body utilise the oil more efficiently. Oil is also a useful source of calories for horses who require a low starch diet, such as those prone to laminitis.”

Liz Bulbrook

- “Make sure that joints, tendons and ligaments are supported with amino acids, minerals and supplements, particularly during periods of increasing workload.”

Chloe Casalis de Pury