

Wellbeing

A big issue

Keep your horse in good shape this summer by paying attention to his diet and exercise. Two experts offer their advice

As the warmer weather approaches and the grass starts to grow, many of us struggle to keep our horses at a healthy weight. Some horses only have to look at the spring grass to pile on the pounds, but how concerned should you really be and what changes can you make to ensure he stays fit, not fat?

“The only way for a horse to get fat is if the energy he consumes exceeds the energy he expends,” says independent equine nutritionist Alexandra Wesker. “Equally, the only way for him to lose fat is if the energy he consumes is less than the energy he expends. The amount of energy consumed is increased by your horse eating more or eating feed with a higher energy content, whereas expended energy rises when he exercises more or if the exercise is more intensive.”

Like humans, some horses are more prone to weight gain than others. If that sounds familiar, it’s important to be vigilant about the amount of feed and exercise he is getting.

“Typically, native breeds are more prone to being overweight, because they’ve evolved to withstand harsh winters, poor grazing and exposure to the elements,” says the Mare And Foal Sanctuary’s Sian Morris.

“Today’s domesticated horses often have a higher calorie intake because they have access to high-quality grazing, hay or haylage and hard feed. In addition, they are often only in light work, which means they don’t burn many calories or maintain muscle tone.”



Our experts



Alexandra Wesker MSc RNutr MSB RSciTech is an independent equine nutritionist.



Sian Morris works at the Mare and Foal Sanctuary, assisting with rehoming of horses, handling welfare concerns and liaising with loan homes.

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Dangers of being fat

Many vets and equine charities will tell you that equine obesity is a major problem in the UK. With our damp, sunny climate, grass growth can be sudden and its sugar levels may be high. This can pose a real threat to your horse's health, and experts warn owners to be aware of the dangers in order to keep their horses healthy.

An overweight horse is at an increased risk of...

- **laminitis.**
- **equine metabolic syndrome.**
- **insulin resistance.**
- **stress on his heart and lungs.**
- **bone and joint problems, if he is young.**
- **excess strain on the limbs and joints.**
- **becoming easily fatigued.**
- **arthritis.**
- **difficulties giving birth.**

Calorie counting



Monitoring your horse's calorie intake is a good indicator of how much energy he is receiving. The challenge is to provide enough food to maintain a healthy digestive system, without offering more calories than is essential.

Alexandra advises: "If you want to feed less energy but don't want to compromise on the amount of food, the energy content of the food needs to be reduced. When it comes to concentrates, choose one with less energy. If you're at all unsure of which feed to choose, consult an equine nutritionist to find the best option for your horse.



"Energy intake can be reduced by feeding a different form of roughage. For example, hay has a lower energy content than grass or haylage. If your horse lives out, you can decrease the size of his paddock and supplement his diet with hay – if he is eating the hay, he'll be consuming fewer calories than if he's eating grass. This offers your horse the benefits of turnout, while providing roughage with a lower energy content.



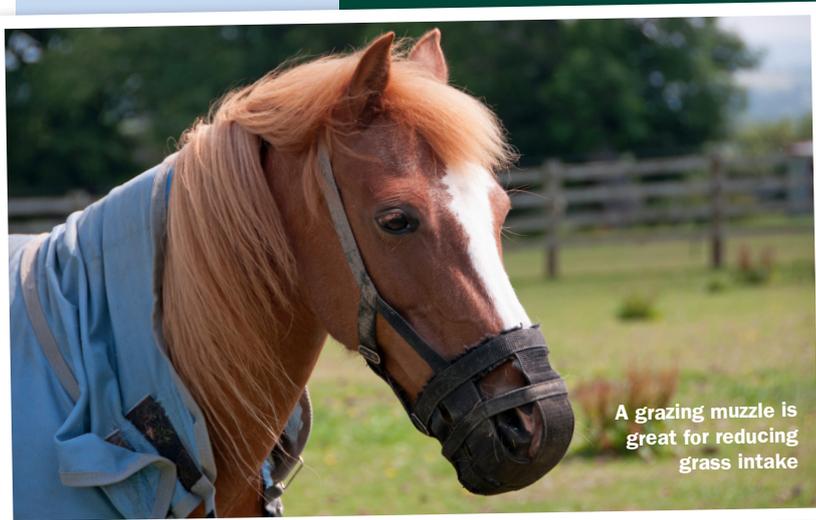
"Another way to reduce the amount of sugar in hay is to soak it for several hours. However, soaking reduces hay's mineral content. Providing a mineral lick at all times is a way of ensuring your horse is receiving sodium, magnesium, phosphorus and copper, which are the important minerals and trace elements he needs in his diet. Providing a mineral lick is a good idea, even if his hay isn't soaked."



At the Mare and Foal Sanctuary, the staff use a variety of methods to control the residents' food intake.

Sian explains: "You can reduce your horse's grazing by using a grazing muzzle, strip grazing the paddock or by bringing him into a stable, barn or yard to manage his diet more closely. "Also, consider whether your horse really needs to be fed concentrates.

Take into consideration his breed, type, temperament, workload and current body condition score. A good way to reduce your horse's roughage intake while he is stabled is to double-net your hay (one inside the other) or use small-holed haylage nets."



A grazing muzzle is great for reducing grass intake

The right workload

Paying attention to your horse's diet is only half the battle to keeping his waistline trim. The amount and type of exercise you include in his weekly routine is also a key factor. "Exercise is the best way to reduce a horse's weight and the amount of energy expended should be more than the energy consumed," Alexandra explains. "Enter that jumping class you have been thinking about doing or go for a longer hack, including some hill work."

Summer is the prime time to enjoy your horse, with the longer days and better weather making horse-owning a pleasure. But by asking an overweight horse to work harder, you are putting him at risk of developing other problems. Before embarking on an increased exercise regime, it's important to remember that, just like any horse, a

fat horse will need time to develop his fitness.

"It's important to increase your horse's workload slowly, especially if he's overweight, in order to prevent unnecessary strain on his limbs, heart and lungs," says Sian. "An overweight horse has to make an increased respiratory effort during exercise, will lack stamina and muscle, and will generally be less fit for the job than a horse who is a healthy weight.

"At the Mare and Foal Sanctuary, we have individually tailored exercise plans, starting with groundwork and progressing to ridden work in walk, gradually increasing the workload and intensity," says Sian. "If your horse is sound, but not trained to ride, you could take up horse agility, go for walks in-hand, or lunge or long-rein him to keep it varied."

Exercise is the best way to reduce a horse's weight – the energy expended should be more than the energy consumed

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Top tips

- Roughage generally provides less energy the tougher it gets. Fresh pasture gives the most energy, followed by haylage, hay and then straw. Mixing straw with your current roughage is a way of decreasing your horse's energy intake.
- You can also mix a little straw with concentrates. Introduce straw into the diet slowly, because horses need to adapt to chewing more thoroughly to prevent choke and impaction colic. Avoid feeding straw to horses with dental problems.
- If you feed concentrates, place a large stone in the bucket to slow down your horse's feeding rate. The stone must be large and smooth to prevent your horse hurting himself or swallowing it.
- Avoid feeding too many treats and never make them a part of the horse's general diet. If you get your horse's diet right, he will not be hungry and there will be no need for extras.
- Avoid leaving your horse without feed. This causes boredom and stress and enhances the development of gastric ulcers.
- For a lower calorie diet, choose feedstuffs carefully. Read the packaging and opt for low calorie or unmolassed feeds.
- Graze overweight horses on poor quality pasture. Avoid dairy pasture or fertilised paddocks.
- Place feed in a treat ball and provide fibre in the form of chaff – this will slow the eating process and increase chewing time.
- Track grazing is a great way to limit your horse's grass intake and encourage him to move around more to access the grass.
- Fit a grazing muzzle. Your horse may need showing how to eat through it, too. However, they are very effective at limiting grass intake.
- Slowly but steadily increase the amount and intensity of work to help your horse burn more calories.
- If your horse is on a restricted or a forage-only diet, he will need a feed balancer or a broad-spectrum vitamin and mineral supplement to ensure he is receiving a balanced diet.

Body condition scoring

Body fat of horses is scored using a chart. The chart used in the UK is the Carroll and Huntington chart, ranging from 0–5 (the Henneke System ranges from 1–9 and is commonly used in the USA). Horses are classed as fat if they score a 4 on the Carroll and Huntington scale and very fat if they score a 5. Body fat is stored in multiple areas of the body, mainly the neck, shoulder and bottom, and each area is scored according to the chart then averaged for an overall body fat score.

For more information on how to body score your horse, visit horseandrideruk.com and search for condition scoring.



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