

Obesity in Horses: A Link to Lameness

Information from the University of Illinois Veterinary Hospital

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Obesity is a common problem in horses that is often unrecognized and sometimes ignored by horse owners.

Recent studies have reported that between 49 percent and 54 percent of pleasure horses are overweight, and one of these articles said that 20 percent of the overweight horses are classified as obese. (See references below.)

There are many causes of obesity, including genetic factors, overfeeding, and a more sedentary lifestyle. Certain breeds of horses and ponies seem to be predisposed to obesity or regional fat accumulation in the neck or rump. These "easy keepers" are able to maintain body weight while ingesting relatively fewer calories than herd-mates.

When genetic predisposition is coupled with a sedentary lifestyle and access to excessive calories, obesity is the result. Excess calories can be either in the form of concentrates added to the forage portion of the diet or unlimited access to lush pasture.

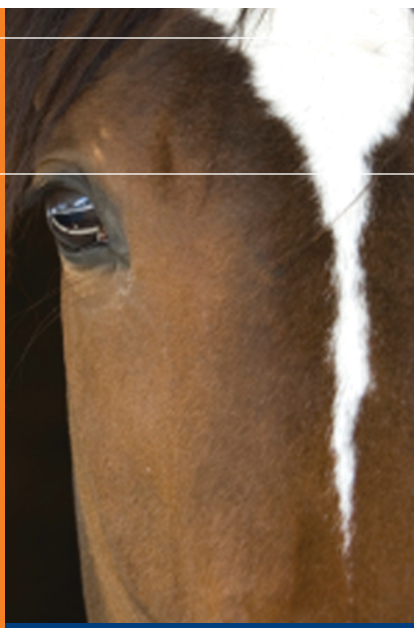
Obesity has been associated with increased strain on bones and tendons and exercise intolerance. Uncontrolled obesity can lead to metabolic disturbances such as insulin resistance, which plays a major role in pasture-associated laminitis.

Laminitis is an extremely painful condition that causes damage to weight-supporting structures of the horse's hoof and may result in chronic, debilitating lameness. This triad of obesity or regional fat accumulation, insulin resistance, and laminitis has been termed **equine metabolic syndrome**.

Veterinarians at the University of Illinois can help you manage your overweight horse. They can demonstrate methods to evaluate body condition and to estimate body weight. Additionally, they can evaluate your horse for the presence of concurrent disease such as equine Cushing's disease, insulin resistance, and sub-acute, or chronic, laminitis.

With this information, a program of controlled exercise, dietary management, and medical treatment of pre-existing conditions can be tailored to help maintain the health of your horse.

1. C.A. Wyse, K.A. McNie, V.J. Tannahill, and S. Love. (2008) Prevalence of obesity in riding horses in Scotland. *Vet Rec* 162: 590-591.
2. C.D. Thatcher, R.S. Pleasant, R.J. Geor, F. Elvinger, K.A. Negrin, J. Franklin, L. Gay and S.R. Were. (2008) Prevalence of obesity in mature horses: an equine body condition study. *Journal of Animal Physiology and Animal Nutrition*. 92(2): 222-222.
3. H.M. Stephenson, M.J. Green, and S.L. Freeman. (2010) Prevalence of obesity in a population of horses in the UK. *Vet Rec* 168: 131.



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