

Spring has sprung with a vengeance. Flowers are blooming everywhere, pollen is coating all possible surfaces, and the grass is growing so fast that it needs to be mowed three times per week. After the long, hard winter, this is a blessing. You may even be noticing that your horses, which may have lost a bit of weight over the winter, are beginning to fill out and look plump again.

Everyone likes to see a well-fed, shiny horse. But, be careful. Carrying excess weight is just as dangerous for a horse, if not more so, than being somewhat underweight. Obesity in horses carries an increased risk of several diseases and may shorten their lifespans. Overweight horses are more prone to laminitis (founder), lameness, colic, and exercise intolerance.

As I've discussed in the past, obesity in horses increases their risk of insulin resistance. Insulin resistance, in turn, increases a horse's risk of developing laminitis. If left untreated, laminitis is a crippling disease that may result in euthanasia of the affected horse.

Carrying around excess weight increases the stress and concussion on a horse's limbs. Consequently, joints, bones, and soft tissue structures may become overburdened. The result of this excess stress and strain is commonly a lameness problem.

Similar to humans, many horses store excess body fat in their abdomens. This excess fat can sometimes form benign fatty tumors called lipomas. These lipomas most commonly form in the mesentery of the small intestine and may become pedunculated (that is, grow on the end of a long stalk). Although lipomas themselves do not cause the horse any discomfort, they may wrap around a section of small intestine causing a severe colic. There is no treatment for this form of colic other than abdominal surgery to remove the lipoma and any dead small intestine.

Exercise intolerance in horses is most simply defined as the inability to perform up to the owner's expectations. As you can imagine, if your horse is carrying around an extra hundred pounds, he may have trouble jumping that hunter course or going on a five hour trail ride. The excess weight is very simply weighing him down.

So, how do you determine if your horse is overweight? The simplest way is to palpate the ribcage area. In a normal horse, you should be able to feel, but not see, their ribs. If you cannot feel your horse's ribs, he is overweight. If you can see his ribs, he is underweight. There is also a body condition scoring system (the Henneke system) that can be used. There are criteria for evaluation defined by this system. Under it, a normal riding horse is a BCS (Body Condition Score) of 5 out of 9. Anything higher is considered overweight.

If you have determined that your horse is overweight, now is the time to become proactive and get him on a diet before any deleterious consequences become apparent. There are several strategies that you might employ to get your horse to lose weight. Choice number one is to limit his grazing. This can be successfully accomplished by restricting him to only a few hours of grazing per day. He can spend the rest of his time in a dry lot or in a stall with access to an appropriate amount of hay. Alternatively, you can limit the amount of grass he can consume by fitting him with a grazing muzzle. The contraption may look cruel, but it is not as cruel as the pain a laminitic horse is forced to suffer.

Another option is to increase your horse's exercise. If there are no contraindications to exercise (current bout of laminitis, lameness issues), this may be the best option for inducing weight loss in your horse. Exercise causes him to burn more calories. In addition, it can increase his insulin sensitivity (decrease his insulin resistance) and lead to a basically healthier horse. Thirty minutes of moderate exercise per day is usually enough to cause weight loss without over-stressing the horse. This exercise may consist of longeing at the trot, under saddle work in the ring or on the trails, or round pen work.

Any way that you accomplish it, keeping your horse at his ideal weight will benefit both of you. He will hopefully be a sound, happy, and willing partner for you for many years to come.