Don’t settle for anything less than Ideal: Consequences of being Too Fat

**Obesity is a rising health concern**
23% - 51% of horses are reported to be overweight or obese\(^1\)-\(^5\). Since owners can sometimes underestimate a horse’s body condition score\(^4\),\(^5\), obesity rates may be even higher. Obesity is associated with many negative health consequences. Take a preventive stance against obesity by reviewing the Henneke Body Condition Score\(^6\) (BCS) system, and using it on a regular basis. Equine Guelph has developed a barn poster to help horse owners keep accurate track of their horse’s BCS.

**What is an overweight or obese horse?**
- Overweight and obese horses are those with body condition scores of greater than 7 on the Henneke BCS system
- A score of 7 may be too high for some horses (e.g. athletic horses), but acceptable for others (e.g. a broodmare going into winter)

**Risk factors**
- Certain breeds, such as pony breeds\(^5\)
- Overfeeding
- Primary use\(^7\)
  - Pleasure riding or non-ridden horses are more likely to be obese than competition horses
- Easy keepers\(^7\)
- Summer season\(^8\)
- Dominant position in the herd\(^9\)
- Blanketing

**Consequences\(^10\)**
- Exercise intolerance
  - Longer post-exercise recovery time
- Less effective at thermoregulation
- Decreased reproductivity performance
  - Altered estrous cycles
  - Changes to the follicle and oocyte\(^11\)
  - Problems with follicle development and oocyte release
- Benign lipomas, which can cause obstructions in the digestive tract
- Increased production of inflammatory molecules in the body
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- Altered metabolism\(^1\)\(^2\) (e.g. insulin resistance), resulting in increased risk of:
  - Equine Metabolic Syndrome
  - Laminitis
  - Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction
  - Osteoarthritis and osteochondrosis
  - Hyperlipidemia and hepatic lipidosis
  - Diabetes mellitus
  - Systemic inflammation

**Management tips**
- Schedule a veterinary visit to address any underlying causes
- Consult with veterinarian and/or equine nutritionist to develop a weight loss plan, which may involve restricting feed intake (especially through pasture) and/or eliminating concentrate feed the horse is receiving
- Reducing weight by starvation is not viable or lawful. Consequences are dire.
- Provide free access to water and loose salt. A good quality forage balancer is essential when restricting feed.
- Increase the amount of exercise
- Prevent boredom between meals by:
  - Hay nets and slow feeders to increase time spent foraging
  - Divide forage in piles to encourage movement
  - Provide a play ball with a small handful of high-fibre pellets between feedings. This feed should be included as part of the horse’s calculated feed allowance for the day.
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Sources


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