

Obesity in horses can cause serious health issues

By BIRGIT STUTZ
Contributor

In last month's column I talked about weight loss in horses. In this month's column I would like to talk about the opposite, obesity in horses.

Monitoring your horse's health and well-being on a daily basis is important and should be part of your daily routine. Maintaining your horse at the ideal body weight is not always easy and will require changes in nutritional management throughout the year. In nature, a horse's weight fluctuates with the seasons, and it is natural for horses living in the wild to lose weight during the winter months. As well, different breeds and individual horses have varying metabolic rates and therefore varying basic nutritional needs. Certain breeds of horses and especially ponies are more prone to weight gain and need to be monitored carefully. A horse with a low level of activity will need a lower amount of feed per unit body weight to maintain its weight than a nervous or very active horse or a horse that is exercised on a regular basis. It's also important to remember that once horses reach middle age, their metabolism starts to slow down and they are often less active, which can contribute to excessive weight gain. For a horse to maintain its weight, its energy intake needs to equal its energy output. Weight gain is the result of an imbalance between calorie intake and expenditure of energy. If there is more calorie intake than energy expenditure, then the horse will gain weight.

Many horse owners tend to feed generously year-round. However, overfeeding horses is not a kindness and can cause lifelong health issues. While many horses are given free access to feed, either through free-choice access to round bales of hay or 24/7 turnout on pasture, many horses will eat far more than they require and end up gaining excessive weight, especially if the horses are inactive. Horses in the wild spend up to 16 hours a day wandering, browsing and grazing grasses and shrubbery, which are high in fibre, but low in sugar. Today's pastures are often full of lush forage, which is high in sugars and starch. This is a very different nutritional scenario.

Obesity can cause a variety of health problems, including chronic diseases. Excessive weight not only puts strain on almost every part of the horse's body (joints, legs, hooves, soft tissue, heart, lungs), but the horse's entire system is also less efficient at regulating body temperature. Arthritis may be accelerated and symptoms can become more acute. As well, it's important to remember that if your horse carries excessive fat on the outside of its body, that means the horse also carries fat deposits inside its body, around and even within internal organs such as liver and kidneys, which interferes with proper functioning of the organ. Overweight horses are also at increased risk of laminitis and metabolic disorders, such as insulin resistance and equine metabolic syndrome. Developmental bone and joint problems are also an increased risk, especially in young and growing horses. And last but not least, an overweight horse is easily fatigued which makes it more prone to injury.

Excess weight in horses may also be a symptom of a health problem. Fat along the horse's crest could be an indicator of insulin resistance, whereas a round belly could be due to parasites.

Recognizing that your horse is overweight is important, but prevention is key. A valuable tool to evaluate your horse's weight is to use a body condition scoring system. There are two types of systems, the five-point scoring system and the nine-point scoring system. Both are based on visual appraisal and touch to assess the degree of fat cover over six key conformation points - neck, withers, crease of the back, tail-head, ribs, and behind the shoulder at the girth. I prefer the nine-point system, in which a score of 5 is considered ideal, meaning the horse is considered to be of a healthy body weight, with ribs that cannot easily be seen yet are easily felt with slight pressure and there is no crease along the horse's back.

Weight tapes can also be used to calculate your horse's weight by measuring the circumference of the girth and relate that to weight. This is, however, not the most accurate method. A more accurate method of calculating your horse's weight is to measure the horse's heart-girth (circumference) in centimetres, square that number, and then multiply that number by the length of the horse (in centimetres). The length of the horse is measured from the point of the shoulder to the point of the rump. This number is then divided by 11,000 to give the final result, equalling weight in kilograms. Another similar method is to multiply heart-girth by heart-girth by length, then divide that number by 330 and add 50. Both methods give you a fairly accurate weight.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FALLING STAR RANCH

While this horse isn't dangerously obese, it carries more pounds than necessary, which adds strain on almost every part of the horse's body.

If you are unsure about your horse's weight, talk to your veterinarian, an equine nutritionist, or an experienced horse person.

If your horse is overweight, it is important to change his diet and exercise levels and make changes gradually. In order for your horse to start losing weight and utilize its fat reserves as fuel, it is essential to switch to a lower-calorie diet. However, make sure that the lower-calorie diet still includes all the essential nutrients required by the horse. Horses should also have access to clean water, salt and minerals. Quality mature grass hays should be the mainstay of your horse's diet. If your horse is on pasture, it is a good idea to limit pasture access and allow your horse to graze in the early morning when the sugars in the grass are low. Place feed and water in different locations to encourage the horse to move as much as possible. It's also a good idea to have a dry lot or other sacrifice area where your horse is able to move around but doesn't have access to forage. While no one likes to pen up horses all day, it is better than having them get obese. Another option are grazing muzzles. In the past few years, "slow-feeding" systems have become quite popular as they more closely resemble a horse's natural feeding pattern.

If your horse is kept in a herd of horses, individual feeding and monitoring is difficult, and some horses, especially higher-ranked ones, will get more than their share while others, most often lower-ranked ones, won't get enough. It is a good idea to group horses according to their nutritional needs, and maybe even keep individual horses by themselves so that their feed intake can be monitored.

There is nothing wrong with horses pawing for forage during the wintertime, as long as the pastures are well-stocked. While daily exercise is one benefit, grasses on winter pasture also have less sugar content.

Exercise is vital for your horse's health and fitness level, as it increases metabolism and causes more calorie burn.

Remember that weight reduction in your horse will require patience, as it takes time for the horse to lose pounds, just as it did to put them on.

Stutz is a Chris Irwin Gold Certified trainer and coach and operates Falling Star Ranch in Dunster, B.C. For more articles by Stutz, visit her blog at <http://fallingstarranch.wordpress.com/>.



LAURA JOHNSON PHOTO

Bernard Du Toit working hard to take down his opponent during his wrestling match. About 20 kids registered for XploreSportz over spring break, and were able to learn about curling, and wheelchair basketball, among others.

HORSESHOEING

Gary Schwartz
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Upcoming BCHBC Robson Valley Chapter events:

Saturday, April 13, 1:30 p.m.: hoof care presentation by farriers Mac Cochrane and Gary Schwartz at Balsam Ranch (Cochrane farm) on Horsey Creek Road, Dunster. This event is free and open to the public.

Saturday, September 21: Third annual poker ride fundraiser, McBride

For more information contact Mellany Ford at 250-968-4342 or by email at mscales@telus.net.

New members welcome!