



Health and weight guide: tips for a healthy horse

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As horse owners we all commit a great deal of time to caring for our horses. **Petplan Equine** aims to support owners with practical advice to help reduce illness and injury in horses and, when prevention is not possible, to support owners financially.

With the support of Redwings' vet Nicola Jarvis, we're delighted to bring you this helpful weight management guide to help keep your horse as healthy as possible.

The healthy horse

In order to determine when your horse is unwell, it is first necessary to observe them when they are fit and healthy.

It is good practice to keep a record of the resting pulse, temperature and respiratory rate for your horse as this will help you to identify when they are unwell.



The 'normal' vital signs for a resting horse are:

Temperature	36.5 – 38°C
Pulse	30 – 40 beats/min
Respiration	8 – 12 breaths/min

Any deviation to these 'norms' may indicate that your horse is unwell, particularly if any combination of two of these signs are abnormal e.g. increased pulse and high temperature.

Signs of good health

- ✓ Pricked ears
- ✓ Alert eyes
- ✓ Weight distributed evenly on all four feet, though a hind leg may be resting
- ✓ Good appetite
- ✓ Regular passing of droppings and urine
- ✓ Clean and shiny skin and coat

A key indicator that something is wrong is a change in your horse's usual behaviour.

The following indicators of health should be taken while the horse is at rest. If you do not feel comfortable carrying these out alone, your vet will be happy to help.

How to take a...



Temperature

The temperature can be taken with either a digital or mercury thermometer.

Care should be taken when doing this as a horse may kick out, so ideally the horse should be held by an assistant.

Stand to one side of your horse and, holding the tail, insert a lubricated thermometer into the rectum, holding it to one side so it sits against the rectal wall. Hold it there for one minute before removing it and reading the temperature.



Pulse

It's a good idea to practise taking your horse's pulse often, so you both become familiar with the process.

The most common place to take the pulse is where the facial artery passes under the lower jaw.

A light pressure applied over the artery with two fingers should allow you to locate the pulse. Once located, count the beats for 15 seconds, then multiply by four.



Respiration

The respiration rate can be observed by watching the side of the horse behind the last rib.

Watch the side move in and out as the horse breathes and count how many times it does this in a minute.

Alternatively, you can watch the nostrils or place a hand in front of the nostril to feel the air as the horse breathes out.



Focus on weight

Extra pounds could result in laminitis, put strain on arthritic joints and have even been shown to increase the risk of certain diseases.

If your horse is too thin, they will struggle with exercise, feel the cold, and may fail to fight infection.

Set a realistic goal and look at achieving that goal gradually, be it weight loss or weight gain.

Starting weight

Wouldn't it be lovely if we all had a horse weighbridge?

Sadly, most of us don't, so other means of assessing your horse's weight include a weight tape or by body condition scoring.

Once you know your horse's starting weight, you'll know if any weight loss or gain is required. Then you can set a goal and work towards it slowly.

Using a weight tape

When using a weight tape, always use the same tape each time and position it in the same place around the girth.

The numerical weight may not be 100% accurate, but it can show you whether your horse is gaining or losing weight over several weeks.



Record your horse's weight on a chart in the feed room to spur you on. Use your weight tape weekly, as this will avoid any sudden changes in weight loss/gain and will help alert you to serious problems.

Body condition scoring

This is a practical, hands-on method for assessing the fat coverage over the neck, middle and hind quarters. Score your horse on a scale of one to five (one being emaciated and five being extremely obese) for each of the three areas.

Remember to identify what's fat and what's muscle. An easy way of doing this is to use your hands and see if it wobbles!

A horse with a score of between 2.5 and 3.5 is in good condition.



Gradual change

Ask your vet what weight they think your horse should be and look at what is achievable. Sudden dieting is very dangerous for a horse and can lead to hyperlipaemia, a serious condition where fat circulates in the blood and can damage organs. All changes **MUST** therefore be made gradually.

Many horses fed ad-lib forage will consume about 2% of their body weight daily, so a diet should initially consist of less than 1.5% of their body weight. That would be around 7.5kg for a 500kg horse.



Remember: slow and steady weight loss is the way to go.

Extra tips for weight loss



- 1 Invest in some scales and always weigh the forage. Don't gauge it by eye; you'll be surprised how overgenerous we owners are.
- 2 Ensure other people in your yard don't undo your good work and treat your horse. If your horse has laminitis, the weight loss could be crucial, so make sure everyone supports you.
- 3 Use hay nets with smaller holes so your horse takes longer to eat. This will prevent boredom. Put a few treats inside a treat ball or invest in stable toys.
- 4 Many people reduce the number of hours on pasture, thinking the horse will eat much less grass and therefore lose weight. However, studies have shown that horses just eat faster, and end up consuming nearly as many calories as an all-day turn out.
- 5 Consider strip grazing to limit the amount of grass consumed. Or, turn your horse out after slimmer horses have gone ahead and eaten the best of the grass down.
- 6 Avoid high sugar commercial feeds and excessive apples and carrots, which are surprisingly high in sugar too.
- 7 A combined programme of reduced calories and exercise is the best approach. It is essential you consult with your vet to ensure your horse is fit and able to exercise. If obesity has induced laminitis, **do not work your horse**.



Extra tips for weight gain

- 1 Weigh your horse's current feed and forage, and calculate their daily intake of calories. You may simply be underfeeding. If you feed soaked hay, then weigh when dry.
- 2 Is your horse quidding (dropping partially chewed food balls as they eat) or taking longer to eat than normal? These could be signs your horse needs a dental examination or is unable to cope with long fibre.
- 3 Have a worm egg count done on a sample of fresh droppings. A high worm burden can cause weight loss or diarrhoea.
- 4 Horses are trickle feeders, so don't overface your horse with food. If they need extra calories, feed them little and often. You'll find they eat more over the course of the day.
- 5 On a cold day, make sure any soaked feed is at room temperature and not ice cold!
- 6 If your horse is still failing to hold weight – despite adequate calories, and after ruling out dental problems or a worm infestation – consult a vet for further advice.



Low-grade pain, such as osteoarthritis, can lead to weight loss, while liver, kidney and intestinal disease can affect the way nutrients are absorbed and metabolised. Your vet can perform tests to rule these out and provide tailored feeding for weight gain.