



For horses, at least, there is such a thing as “too thin.”

by Dr. Kellon, Uckele Health & Nutrition

Overweight horses are grabbing all the headlines, but horses that tend to be very thin can also be a major headache for their owners. While obesity is clearly to be avoided, there is such a thing as too thin.

Horses that are underweight have reduced performance capacity, reduced immunity, less tolerance for cold, reduced fertility and poor physical reserves in the face of a serious injury, illness or major surgery. They are at increased risk of side effects from even common things that are normally distributed to the fat tissue such as vitamins A or D and moxidectin.

If the horse has developed trouble holding weight as a new issue, with the usual offenders of dental issues or parasites taken care of, you need to involve your veterinarian to rule out a serious disease as the cause. Some things are very treatable, like PPID/Cushings, which is a common cause of unexplained weight loss in older horses.

When the horse is otherwise healthy, low weight is a nutrition and digestion issue. The place to start when weight gain is needed is free choice hay. Hay racks or nets will reduce waste so you can gauge intake more accurately. The average adult in maintenance or light work needs to be eating about 2% of body weight in hay per day. If the horse is eating this much or more, and

won't increase further, it's time for other measures.

Senior horses often have poor chewing force even if their teeth look good. They will do well on soft grass but not hay, even if there is no quidding. The solution here is to use hay cubes or pellets, well soaked, and soak all other feed as well. This makes it much easier to chew and digest.

Additional Options

The horse needs both adequate calories and adequate protein to hold a normal weight. If hay is of questionable quality, add a few pounds of alfalfa for a protein boost. If hay crude protein is adequate, an essential amino acid supplement is good insurance. Lysine is most often deficient, followed by methionine and threonine.

Reasonable amounts of fat are a good way to add calories without excessive bulk because fat is more calorie dense than carbohydrate, fiber or protein.

The Uckele Coco-EQ line gives you many options. The original CocoSoya is an incredibly palatable oil that will also ensure the horse eats all meals well. CocoOmega can be used to boost intake of omega-3s when horses are not on pasture. CocoSun uses a special high oleic acid sunflower oil to produce a blend which does not add more omega-6 to the diet. Most horses can have up to 8 oz/day but do not exceed 4 oz in horses with insulin problems.

Older horses, horses with a history of intestinal problems or surgery, and horses with erratic appetites may benefit from support of digestive efficiency from supplements with generous levels of probiotic yeast and bacteria with digestive enzymes. This helps them extract as much nutrition as possible from their food.

It takes some experimentation, but with perseverance you can get your hard keeper to a healthy weight.

Article provided by Uckele Health & Nutrition, for whom author Dr. Eleanor Kellon is a staff veterinary specialist. Dr. Kellon is an established authority in the field of equine nutrition for over 30 years, and a founding member and leader of the Equine Cushings and Insulin Resistance

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