

How to know  
if your horse is...



**WorldHorseWelfare**

...the *Right Weight*



[www.worldhorsewelfare.org](http://www.worldhorsewelfare.org)



# Why is the right weight so important?

## Laminitis is a common condition, meaning it is easy to underestimate its severity.

There are many triggers, but excess weight is one of the most frequent – it is also one that horse owners really can do something about.

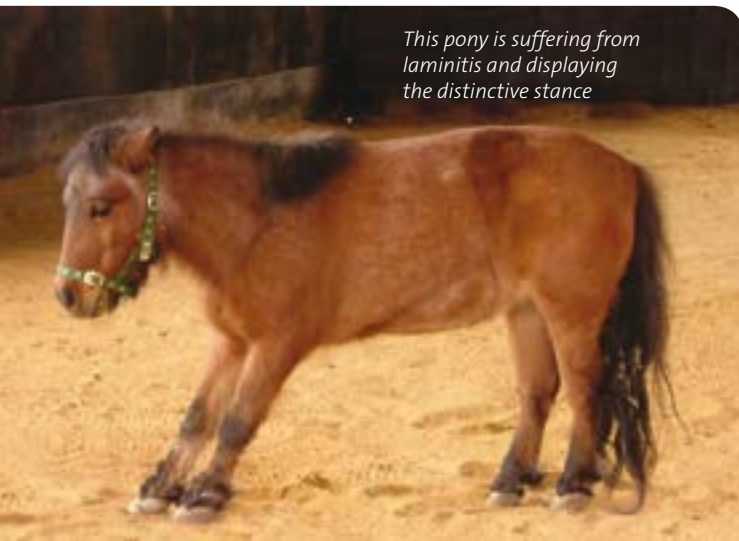
The condition isn't restricted to native ponies during the spring and summer months – it can, and does, affect all types of horse and pony throughout the year.

A horse's hoof wall is attached to the bones within the foot by finger-like structures called laminae. In laminitis

sufferers, this structure starts to separate, causing the bone inside the hoof to drop. In the worst cases, the bone can drop through the sole of the foot.

Laminitis is an incredibly painful condition, which must always be treated as an emergency. However, by regularly monitoring and controlling your horse's condition you should be able to avoid weight-induced laminitis completely.

**For more information please speak to your vet.**



*This pony is suffering from laminitis and displaying the distinctive stance*

Most of us realise why it's important for horses not to be underweight, but did you know that an overweight horse risks serious, long-term health problems? These include heart and lung conditions, problems with joints and limbs, and laminitis.



**Dollar**



## Case study: the two extremes

Dollar is a 14hh gelding. In the first picture (top left), he was extremely overweight and suffering from laminitis and intermittent lameness.

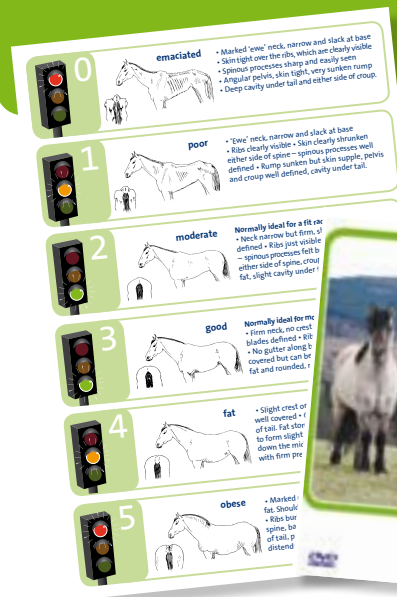
Nine months later, Dollar had lost more than 28 stone in weight. Imagine the extra strain this was putting on his body; he looks like a different horse (bottom left). Once he'd lost the excess, his laminitis was under control and he was sound.

Bahir is another 14hh gelding. When he arrived with us, (top right) he was 28 stone underweight – the same amount under as Dollar was over. This wasn't due to any underlying problems – simply a lack of food.

It took three months to get Bahir to the right weight – a third of the time it took for Dollar, and he didn't suffer any long-term effects. Horses like Dollar, however, will always be prone to laminitis, even once they're in the correct condition, and their weight will need to be managed for the rest of their lives. Although we would never like to see an underweight horse, the long-term implications of a horse being overweight can be more serious.



**Bahir**



## How to fat score your horse

**You can assess your horse's condition by 'fat scoring' (also called body condition scoring).**

You are only assessing the amount of fat a horse is carrying, not their muscle tone, coat condition, etc. In this way, the same system can be applied to everything from a non-

ridden pony to a three-day-event horse. Have a look at the body fat guide over the page – on this five-point system, the ideal is between a two and a three.

Horses are designed to lose weight over the winter months so that they can safely gain weight from the spring flush of grass, so please don't worry if your horse fluctuates between a two and a three throughout the year.

# Taking an average

You can't effectively fat-score a horse just by looking – you need to feel for the fat cover in certain areas. Give your horse one score out of five for his neck and shoulder, one for his middle and

**Watch our video on how to fat score your horse on our website now!**

one for his bottom, then take an average (half points are allowed). Horses store their weight in different areas, so an average of these scores will produce a more accurate assessment.

**1.** Feel along the top of your horse's neck – can you wobble the top of it, or is it firm? Also feel if it is significantly thicker as you move down from the poll towards the withers.

**2.** Run your hand down your horse's neck and onto its shoulder. If fat has built up in front of its shoulder blades, your hand will run from the neck to the shoulder without the shoulder blade 'stopping' your hand. Look at the body fat guide and score your horse out of five for its neck and shoulder.

**3.** Lay your hand across your horse's back. Ideally, your hand should arch over the spine. When horses put weight on in this area, the fat builds up on either side of the spine, giving you a flat hand.

**4.** Run your hand along your horse's side. You should be able to feel its ribs fairly easily. Again, give your horse a score out of five for its back and middle.

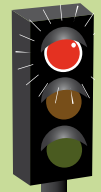
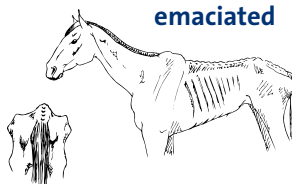

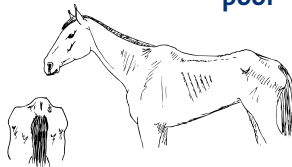
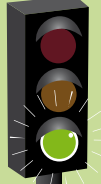
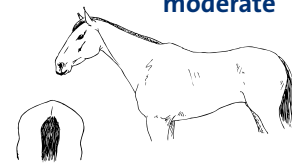
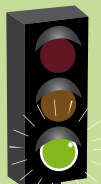

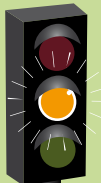



**5.** Look at your horse from behind – safely. Its bottom should have a rounded curve like the letter 'C' on its side. Feel for the hip bones. Give a score out of five for the bottom.

Notes: Native breeds often store excess fat in 'pads' behind their shoulders, so keep an eye out for this and allow for it in the score you give. Horses don't store much fat on their underbellies, so don't use this area to assess their weight.

**Q:** *Is this fat that I'm feeling on my horse, or muscle?*

**A:** Think how the muscle on your upper arm feels and then think of the wobbly bit under your arm. That's the difference you're feeling for on your horse.

Once you have all three scores, add them together and divide by three to find you horse's average overall fat score. Use the chart on the back of this leaflet to keep a record.

 <p>0</p>	<p><b>emaciated</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marked 'ewe' neck, narrow and slack at base</li> <li>• Skin tight over the ribs, which are clearly visible</li> <li>• Spinous processes sharp and easily seen</li> <li>• Angular pelvis, skin tight, very sunken rump</li> <li>• Deep cavity under tail and either side of croup.</li> </ul>
 <p>1</p>	<p><b>poor</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Ewe' neck, narrow and slack at base</li> <li>• Ribs clearly visible • Skin clearly shrunken either side of spine – spinous processes well defined • Rump sunken but skin supple, pelvis and croup well defined, cavity under tail.</li> </ul>
 <p>2</p>	<p><b>moderate</b></p> 	<p><b>Normally ideal for a fit racehorse or eventer.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neck narrow but firm, shoulder blade clearly defined • Ribs just visible • Spine well covered – spinous processes felt but not seen • Rump flat either side of spine, croup well defined, some fat, slight cavity under tail.</li> </ul>
 <p>3</p>	<p><b>good</b></p> 	<p><b>Normally ideal for most show and leisure horses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Firm neck, no crest (except stallions), shoulder blades defined • Ribs just covered, easily felt</li> <li>• No gutter along back – spinous processes covered but can be felt • Pelvis covered by fat and rounded, no gutter, pelvis easily felt.</li> </ul>
 <p>4</p>	<p><b>fat</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slight crest on neck, wide and spongy • Ribs well covered • Gutter along spine to root of tail. Fat stored either side of the spine to form slight 'apple bottom', with a gutter down the middle • Pelvis covered, felt only with firm pressure.</li> </ul>
 <p>5</p>	<p><b>obese</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marked crest, very wide and firm, creases of fat. Shoulder blade buried and difficult to feel</li> <li>• Ribs buried, cannot be felt • Deep gutter along spine, back broad and flat. Deep gutter to root of tail, producing marked apple bottom, skin distended • Pelvis buried, cannot be felt.</li> </ul>

# Helpful tips

Here are a variety of ways to help your horse shape up. If your horse is very overweight, contact your vet before making any changes.

**The best form of exercise to help your horse to lose weight is a brisk walk or steady trot.** Faster work burns carbohydrate rather than fat, so find ways to build walking or trotting into your routine. This doesn't need to be riding – you can work your horse in-hand.

**Giving an overweight horse a high-energy feed because he seems sluggish won't necessarily give him more energy for work.** It would be better to help your horse lose the excess weight and increase fitness.

**Soak hay for 12 hours – using fresh water every time – to reduce its calorie content.** Remember to dispose of the waste water as effluent. Oat or barley straw can be used to dilute unsoaked hay. Check your horse's droppings to make sure the straw fibres are around 4 mm long. If they are significantly longer, straw is not suitable. If



you feed straw or soaked hay, you must also feed a general vitamin and mineral supplement. It may be useful to have the hay analysed if your horse is prone to laminitis.

**Many leisure horses will get more calories than they need from grass alone.** A twist on strip grazing will encourage your horse to walk more whilst restricting the amount of grass available to eat; fence off a 'U' shape in the paddock – with the gate at one end and water at the other – or fence a square in the middle and only allow grazing around the

outside edge. Providing they all get on, put more animals in the same field or mow your grazing to mimic this effect – but make sure no cuttings are left in the field. Use a mower that doesn't leave oil or petrol on the field, as this can be dangerous. Maintain the grazing correctly, picking up droppings and removing poisonous plants.

**If you use a hard feed, contact the manufacturer to check their definitions of light, medium or hard work** – these may be different to yours, and you could be inadvertently over-feeding.

**Weigh your feed and find a container that fits exactly the amount you should be giving.** It is very easy for half a scoop to turn into three-quarters or more.

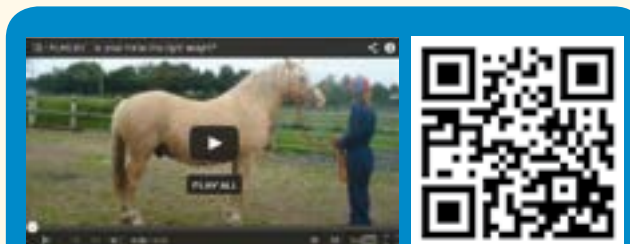
**Reduce your horse's rate of consumption.** Consider using a muzzle that slows grazing. Gradually build up the time spent wearing it to give your horse time to adjust. If feeding hay or haylage try using a small-holed haynet.

**It's tempting to rug horses,** but do remember that horses already have waterproof coats and their own central heating systems; digesting fibre generates heat that helps keep the horse warm from the inside out. If your horse is overweight consider whether it could go without a rug or if a lighter weight would be more suitable.

**If you are giving your horse a hard feed just to add in a supplement** this could be enough to stop it losing excess weight. Can you give the supplement in a way that provides fewer calories?

**Fat-score and use a weigh tape on your horse every two weeks.** You will notice any changes in weight far more quickly than you could by eye. Make sure you use the tape at the same time of day, as a horse's weight will fluctuate significantly over a 24-hour period.

**Remember, if your horse's weight changes significantly at any point, its tack may no longer fit.** This can lead to a variety of problems, so get this checked by an expert.



Watch our video on how to fat score your horse  
[www.worldhorsewelfare.org/rightweight](http://www.worldhorsewelfare.org/rightweight)

**Visit the World Horse Welfare website to watch a fat-scoring demonstration video.**

It is a good idea to fat-score your horse once a fortnight and keep a record. That way, you will always know whether he needs to gain, lose or maintain weight. This is vital when deciding what to feed him.

Remember that 'feed' includes grass, hay and haylage, as well as hard, or concentrate, feed.

Keep an eye on how your horse is affected by any changes you make. What is suitable at one stage may not be suitable a few weeks down the line. Remember to give your horse time to adjust to any changes you make.

If you need any further advice, speak to experts such as your vet, farrier and saddler. Most feed companies have help lines where you can speak to a qualified nutritionist. You can also call our Advice Line, on 01953 497238.

# Weight chart

Horse's name \_\_\_\_\_

Date	Fat score				Weight (kgs)
	Neck/ shoulder	Middle	Bottom	Average	

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