



**SPILLERS**<sup>TM</sup>

# A guide to becoming a SPILLERS<sup>TM</sup> Slimmer

- ◆ Weight loss tips
- ◆ Body condition scoring
- ◆ Using a weigh tape
- ◆ Join the Slimmers' Club



Guide updated, 2024.





# Worried about weight?

Do you have a horse or pony who only needs to look at a blade of grass or a strand of hay to pile on the pounds? It can be a challenge to restrict calories whilst ensuring they still get enough fibre to keep them happy and their digestive system healthy.

We are here to help! In this guide you will find:

- ◆ An overview of obesity and excess weight gain.
- ◆ Monitoring weight and body condition.
- ◆ A guide to body condition scoring.
- ◆ How to use a weigh tape.
- ◆ Tips for restricting forage intake.
- ◆ The SPILLERS™ Slimmers' Club.

Call our  
Care-Line on  
01908 226626



## Excess weight gain & obesity

Like people, horses gain excess weight when they consume more energy (calories) than they burn. Restricting energy intake is the key to weight loss but whilst the theory may sound simple, we know that taking control of your horse's waistline can be far from easy in practice. There's no silver bullet and the most suitable management will depend on your individual horse/ pony and your yard environment. This guide is full of tips to help get you started but for specific advice, contact the SPILLERS™ Care-Line, especially if your horse is prone to laminitis.

## Is your horse overweight?

Bodyweight alone is just a number and what is considered 'ideal' varies between individuals. A body condition score (BCS) of 5 on the 1-9 scale is generally considered ideal whilst a score of 7 or above is considered obese.

### Health risks associated with obesity include:

- ◆ Insulin dysregulation (ID)
- ◆ Laminitis
- ◆ Poorer prognosis and recovery from laminitis
- ◆ Heat intolerance
- ◆ Respiratory compromise
- ◆ Joint strain & arthritis
- ◆ Increased 'inflamm-aging' (chronic low grade inflammation associated with ageing)
- ◆ Colic associated with lipomas (benign fatty tumours attached to the intestine)



### Poor performance

A lack of energy under-saddle is often mistaken for a lack of energy in the diet when in fact, being overweight (which is the result of consuming too much energy), can have a significant effect on the horse's energy levels.

### Weight loss goals

Safe weight loss takes time so aim for a reduction of approximately 0.5-1% of bodyweight per week (2.5-5kg for a 500kg horse) after the first week if moving from unrestricted forage. Greater losses in the first week are common and likely to be the result of reduced gut fill - you may have experienced something similar if you have ever been on a diet!



## **Feed and management tips**

### **Cut calories not nutrients!**

Forage only diets may be lacking in key nutrients including lysine, copper, zinc, selenium and vitamin E. Balancers are small, nutrient dense feeds (often pellets) designed to provide a concentrated source of vitamins, minerals and quality protein. Due to the low feeding rate, balancers contribute minimal calories, starch and sugar to the diet, making them the ideal option for good doers.

### **Use a low-calorie chaff to help extend eating time**

Adding a small amount of a low calorie chaff or short chopped fibre to meals helps to bulk out the bucket and extend eating time without compromising your horse's waistline.

### **Energy = calories**

Unfortunately, energy and calories are the same thing which means it's impossible to feed more of one without the other. Don't be tempted to increase your horse's feed if he is lethargic to ride or in anticipation of increased work.

### **Maintain a regular exercise programme (if possible)**

Research has shown that even small amounts of exercise may help to support a healthy metabolism, even if it doesn't result in additional weight loss.

### **Embrace the winter!**

Healthy horses with natural coats adapt to regulating their own body temperature relatively quickly so avoid over-rugging to allow your horse to use some of his excess body fat to keep warm as nature intended.

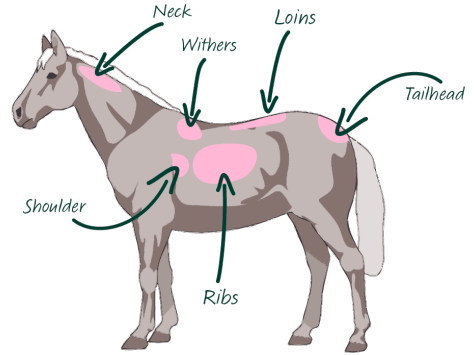


# Monitoring weight & body condition

Ideally monitor your horse's weight and belly-girth weekly and his body condition score (BCS) fortnightly. You could also try monitoring his heart girth, rump width and body condition index (BCI).

## Body condition scoring

Body condition scoring is a practical method of assessing body fat by eye and by touch. Several areas where fat is commonly laid down are scored using a numerical grading system, most commonly a 1-9 or 0-5 scale. We recommend using the 1-9 scale but whichever system you choose, the most important thing is to apply it consistently.

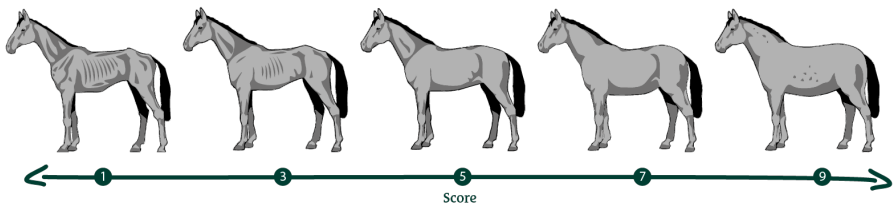


## What is the ideal BCS?

A BCS of 5/9 (moderate) is generally considered ideal but seasonal fluctuations in weight are natural, especially for natives. Provided they are otherwise healthy and not laminitic, a BCS of 6 at the end of summer is generally considered acceptable for most leisure horses, whilst allowing good doers to slim down to a leaner score of 4.5 over winter months can help to prevent excess weight gain in the spring.

## How to BCS your horse (1-9 scale)

Start by making sure your horse is stood as squarely as possible on a firm level surface. Score each of the 6 areas (neck, withers, shoulder, ribs, loins & tailhead) individually before taking an average to calculate your horse's final score. Have you tried using the BCS tool on our website?





## Body condition scoring tips

- ◆ Body condition scoring is best carried out by the same person but getting a second opinion can sometimes be helpful.
- ◆ Always have the score descriptors on hand, even if you have a lot of experience.
- ◆ Body condition scoring is an assessment of fat, not muscle – this means it's possible for horses to have a healthy BCS despite being under-muscled.
- ◆ In general muscle feels firm and fat feels spongy but a loss of muscle tone or 'softer' muscle in unfit or older horses may sometimes be confused with fat. Low muscle mass in older horses may be mistaken for a lack of fat covering.



## Changes take time

Monitoring your horse's BCS every two weeks will help you to keep track of gradual changes. However, it's important to remember that it can take a number of weeks for changes in BCS to occur, especially in very overweight/ obese horses. If your horse needs to lose weight, try not to get too disheartened if progress seems slow initially, as he may still be losing weight/ internal fat – like people, get horses get fat on the inside too!

## Body Condition Index (BCI)

The BCI is a method of assessing body fat similar to the body mass index (BMI) used in humans. Check out the BCI calculator on the SPILLERS™ website for more information.



## **Weigh tapes**

Weigh tapes may under or over-estimate your horse's actual bodyweight but if used correctly, they can be a useful way of tracking gradual changes.

- ◆ Make sure your horse is stood as squarely as possible on a firm, level surface.
- ◆ Place the weigh tape over the horse's back at the base of the withers. Next, bring the tape underneath the girth area just behind the foreleg and elbow.
- ◆ Make sure the tape is correctly positioned – it is likely to be on slight angled line (/).
- ◆ Always use the same weigh tape and ideally at the same time of day – changes in gut fill can affect the result!

## **Belly girth**

Measured around the widest point of the trunk (belly), belly-girth can be a very sensitive indicator of generalised fat loss in response to changes in diet. This perhaps makes it one of the most useful weight monitoring tools in overweight horses and ponies.

## **Heart girth**

Measured as the horse/ pony breathes out by passing a tape measure immediately behind the base of the withers and the elbows.

## **Rump width**

Measured from the point of one hip to the point of the other.





# Tips for managing forage intake

Forage is the largest source of calories in the horse's diet - it's also the hardest for owners to control! Many owners are also concerned about their horses' mental wellbeing if restricting forage intake and time at pasture. Redwings Horse Sanctuary provide enrichment tips on their website, visit [www.redwings.org.uk/news-and-views/enrichment](http://www.redwings.org.uk/news-and-views/enrichment).

## Did you know?

A 250kg pony living out at grass may consume enough energy (calories) to fuel a 500kg racehorse – equivalent to more than half a bag of conditioning cubes every day!

## Beware of binge eating!

Turning out for short periods without a muzzle or allowing free access to grazing after removing a muzzle may lead to gorging. In fact, research has shown that ponies may consume almost 1% of their bodyweight (dry matter) in just 3 hours which may equate to two-thirds of the total daily forage allowance for those on a diet!



## Consider using a grazing muzzle

Grazing muzzles have been shown to reduce grass intake by an average of 80% in ponies turned out for 3 hours, regardless of the season (grazing muzzles can be used in winter months too provided the grass is a suitable length).



## Tips for using a grazing muzzle safely

- ◆ Introduce your horse to wearing a muzzle gradually and make sure he is happy to graze and drink before leaving him unsupervised.

- ◆ Look out for signs of rubbing or discomfort.
- ◆ Check your muzzle regularly for signs of wear and tear.
- ◆ Monitor your horse's behaviour for signs of distress and/ or frustration.
- ◆ Look out for signs of bullying.
- ◆ Check the length of your grass – if it is too long or too short your horse/ pony may be not be able to graze at all while wearing a muzzle.
- ◆ Muzzles should not be left on 24/7, even in horses and ponies used to wearing them.
- ◆ Some horses and ponies will gain weight if only wearing a muzzle for part of their time at grass. Rather than allowing free access to grazing once the muzzle has been removed, consider stabling or 'non-grass turnout'.
- ◆ Monitor your horse or pony's condition regularly to ensure they are not losing or gaining excessive weight.
- ◆ Long term use of a grazing muzzle may cause your horse or pony's teeth to wear unevenly so make sure they are checked regularly by your vet or an equine dental technician.

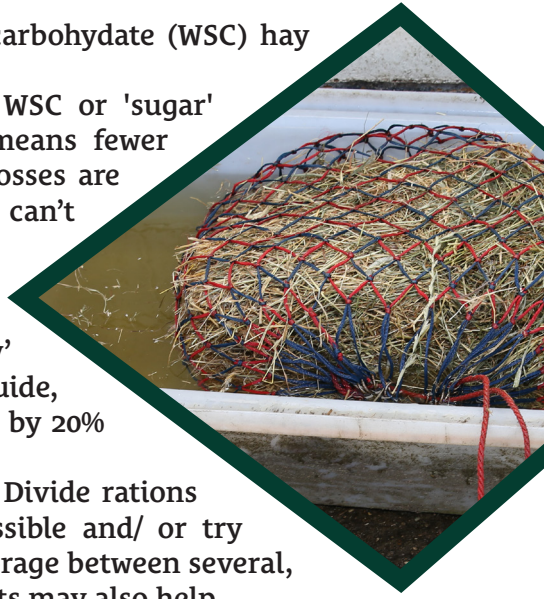


### **Does strip grazing really work?**

In a recent study three groups of four ponies were turned out into individual paddocks that had been measured at the start of the study to provide 1.5% of the ponies' bodyweight (dry matter) in grass, for 28 days. Each group was then assigned to one of four management practices: free access to their whole paddock, strip grazing without a back fence and strip grazing with a back fence. Strip grazed ponies gained significantly less weight than ponies in the total allowance group, regardless of whether a back fence was used. In fact, in this particular study, strip grazing without a back fence was no less effective than strip grazing with a back fence, even though the grazing area got larger every day. In practice how far you should move the fence (and possibly whether or not a back fence may be beneficial) will depend on many factors including the size of the field and how many horses are turned out in it, your horse(s) body condition, the quality and quantity of grass available and the rate of grass growth.

## Hay, haylage & straw

- ◆ Ideally feed a low water soluble carbohydrate (WSC) hay over a low WSC haylage.
- ◆ Soaking hay helps to reduce the WSC or 'sugar' content and of course, less sugar means fewer calories! Just remember that sugar losses are highly variable which means soaking can't guarantee suitability for laminitics.
- ◆ Due to a loss of nutrients (and therefore dry matter) into the water, each haynet will contain less 'hay' and more water post soaking. As a guide, increase the amount of hay you soak by 20% to compensate.
- ◆ Avoid long periods without forage. Divide rations into as many small servings as possible and/ or try using slow-feeders or nets. Splitting forage between several, double-netted, small-holed haylage nets may also help.
- ◆ Consider replacing up to 30-50% of your horse's hay with straw. A hay straw fed should always be introduced gradually and be of good hygienic quality. Did you know straw can be steamed before feeding?



## How much forage should I feed?

This is a very difficult question to answer and will depend on a number of factors including how much your horse weighs, their body condition, their diet, how sensitive they are to changes in diet/ management, the nutritional value of the forage provided and whether or not they have access to grazing. Total daily intake should not be restricted to less than 1.5% of current bodyweight (dry matter) which equates to approximately 9kg of hay (11kg if you intend to soak it) for a 500kg horse without access to grazing.



## Try counting your horse's droppings

Counting droppings can be a useful way of monitoring forage intake, especially if your horse has access to grazing and/ or you don't know how much he weighs. If your horse is overweight, aim to reduce the number of droppings by a third initially and never by more than half.



# The SPILLERS™ Slimmers' Club

We are inviting owners of overweight horses and ponies to join the SPILLERS™ Slimmers' Club for support, advice and encouragement to help keep their horse or pony at a healthy weight.

The initiative is supported by Redwings Horse Sanctuary who hope it will help people recognise that an overweight horse can be as much of a welfare risk as an underweight one.

Obesity in the UK leisure population of horses and ponies is a growing problem with major welfare implications. Rates of obesity are considered to be as high as 70% in some populations of ponies. Together with Redwings, our goal is to end equine obesity by 2035.

The SPILLERS Slimmers' Club provides horse owners with invaluable information and advice including weight loss tips, details of how to body condition score and use a weigh tape, diet plans and weight loss records. Club members will also receive access to a dedicated Facebook group where they can share their horse's progress and tips with other owners, as well as post questions for SPILLERS nutrition advisors to answer.



In partnership with...



Join the online community by searching for SPILLERS™ Slimmers on Facebook or scan the QR code.





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