



**SARACEN**  
HORSE FEEDS

## Fact Sheet

### Taking Stock Of Your Horse's Body Condition

Every horse owner at some time has seen a thin horse but, thanks in part to advances made in feeding management, veterinary care, parasite control and dentistry, compassionate horse owners can fatten horses safely and with relative ease. Many horse owners in today's world have also seen porky Shetlands, cuddly ponies, conditioned horses and chubby seniors!! Although horses and ponies can come in all different shapes and sizes, regardless of appearance, if a horse is carrying more weight than optimum then he or she is at risk of a number of health problems. It is now far more common to find an overweight horse than it is an underweight horse.

In general, any equine with a body condition score of 6 or 7 (scale of 1-9) may be described as being overweight, while those scoring 8 or 9 are considered obese (excessively fat).

Most equine vets and nutritionists use a body condition score chart to determine a horse's need to lose or gain weight. Healthy horses have body condition scores of between 4 and 6. This is not to say, however, that healthy horses cannot be thinner or heavier, and certain life stages may prompt scores outside of this range. Examples of horses that are typically thinner than ideal include athletes that are frequently asked to perform strenuous exercise, aged brood mares in the first two to four months of lactation, and horses recovering from illness. In such cases, horses are usually being offered full, nutritionally balanced diets yet are still unable to maintain appropriate body condition. In these cases, the horses are incapable of consuming sufficient calories to fuel both weight gain and work, regardless of whether the work involved is actually performance, growth, lactation or tissue repair. Yet, once the workload is reduced (less strenuous exercise or weaning of a foal), weight gain can be accomplished.

For most horses, a body condition score of 5 seems to be most appropriate. Horses in this state have sufficient fat cover so that ribs cannot be seen but can be felt. There is also no excessive fat deposition around the shoulders, over the withers and topline or around the top of the tail. As researchers dig deeper into the metabolic issues that influence body weight, it is becoming obvious that maintaining horses in moderate body condition is healthier than keeping them even slightly overweight.

#### Getting The Correct Balance

Diets formulated for weight gain often contain high quality forages and concentrate feeds that are rich in energy (calories). As with any species, horses gain weight when more calories are consumed than are used. Once a horse is at its target weight (and a condition score of near 5), it is time to rethink his ration, as a continuation of the 'weight gain' diet may eventually lead to obesity.

The first components of a weight gain diet that should be removed are any high calorie supplements. Feed supplements rich in fat such as Equi Jewel or vegetable oils, are widely used to pack on the pounds, but as the horse reaches an ideal weight, their inclusion in the diet should be gradually tapered off.

The next consideration is the concentrate, as it delivers more calories per pound than forage. Owners should carefully read the feeding instructions that appear on the feed bag or the feed label. In order to ensure that the horse receives optimum vitamin and mineral nutrition, he should consume at least the minimal amount indicated.

For instance, if you are feeding a formula designed for mature horses in light to moderate work and the feeding instructions state explicitly that the horse should be fed 6-8lbs per day, the absolute minimum that can be fed is 6 lbs per day without risking nutritional deficiencies.



**For those who know what they're on.**

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If less than 6lbs is fed, a well formulated vitamin and mineral supplement can be added to make up for nutrient deficiencies caused by low concentrate intake.

If this horse was eating 8lbs of concentrate feed in order to GAIN weight, reducing his consumption by ½-1lb per day (accomplished over the course of several days) should lead to a slower rate of gain or even equilibrium.

At this stage, body condition evaluation becomes a waiting game, as changes in weight often take several weeks. If the horse maintains his body condition on this new amount of feed for several weeks, further reduction by another ½-1lb per day is warranted. If more weeks elapse and he still remains in the desirable body condition, another reduction can be made. As mentioned previously, if owners are feeding less than the recommended amount, feed manufacturers usually suggest a low calorie feed that will provide the horse with protein, vitamins and minerals that he needs e.g. Shape Up.

The final part of the diet for review is the forage. For most horses, a combination of hay and pasture make up the forage allotment. It is not unusual for owners to add alfalfa chaffs etc to a diet if weight gain is required. However, once the horse is in moderate condition good grass hay is most suitable.

Depending upon the situation (and the weather!), horses might have access to lush pasture. As long as the pasture is introduced slowly (increasing by ½ hour increments per day to be safe), calorie rich pastures can do huge amounts for weight gain. As the horse reaches a desirable body condition, grazing may have to be limited if he continues to gain weight. Many good doers become extremely fat on pasture alone and this may also occur in horses that have been on an increasing plane of nutrition. Reducing grazing time or using a grazing muzzle might be appropriate for a horse that tends to get fat on pasture. If pasture provides little in the way of nutrition, then calories must be derived from a ration of concentrate feed and good quality hay.

All changes to the horse's diet should be made gradually over a period of 7-10 days. The horse's gastrointestinal tract is a fragile organ system. If abrupt changes are made, health problems such as diarrhoea, colic or laminitis may ensue. A step by step approach to instituting changes in a diet will help you to keep your horse in moderate body condition.

If a particular nutrition question or problem arises, owners should have on hand the number of a reputable equine nutritionist or feed merchant for consultation. A vet might be able to assist with some nutrition related questions as well.

- **FOR FURTHER TECHNICAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE PRODUCTS OR TO REQUEST A BODY CONDITION SCORE CHART PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE [www.saracenhorsefeeds.co.uk](http://www.saracenhorsefeeds.co.uk) OR FOR A PERSONAL FEEDING PLAN PLEASE CALL OUR FEED HELPLINE 01622 718487**



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