

Feeding the Easy Keeper

Horses that maintain their weight easily are prone to obesity, laminitis, and metabolic issues

Overview

The term “easy keepers” refers to horses and ponies that maintain or gain weight on a minimum amount of food. While easy keepers are widely considered a joy to own in terms of feed costs, you should not underestimate these horses’ potential for obesity, laminitis, and metabolic issues.

Overfeeding a horse is hard on his musculoskeletal system, is contraindicated if he has osteoarthritis, decreases his athletic stamina, interferes with heat dissipation, and can contribute to metabolic syndrome, insulin resistance, and laminitis. For owners of easy keepers, it is particularly important to routinely perform body condition scoring and modify feeding regimens to ensure the horses maintain a healthy body weight.

Body Condition Score

Easy keepers have a tendency to be overweight. One of the contributing factors (besides metabolism) to obesity in horses is a failure of owners to recognize what constitutes a healthy body condition score (BCS). While various body condition scoring systems exist, scoring does not have to be a complicated or time-consuming process. Horses at an appropriate body weight have rib and hip bones that are not visible, but easily felt. In contrast, a horse is considered overweight if:

- His ribs are difficult to feel with firm digital pressure;
- He has a “cresty” neck;
- His withers are rounded and covered in fat;
- The saddle and girth make indents in his fat when positioned;
- His shoulder blades are not easily seen;
- The area surrounding his tailhead is bulging or feels soft; and
- His inner thighs are in contact more than a quarter of the way down the inner thigh region when he is standing square.



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The type of hay you feed an easy keeper is important as some hays are more “nutrient dense” than others. Keep in mind that easy keepers are at risk for obesity, laminitis, and metabolic issues.

Forage-Only Diets for Easy Keepers

Horses require six basic classes of nutrients in their diets: water, carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins, and minerals. Forage alone (grass and/or hay) can meet the dietary needs of most horses not involved in moderate to heavy work.

You can offer forage either free-choice or as a daily ration. A healthy adult horse requires 1.5-2.5% of his body weight in hay per day. Easy keepers generally require the equivalent of only 1.5% of their body weight in hay each day. Thus, an average 1,000-pound easy keeper would require 15 pounds of hay daily. The quality of the hay the horse requires depends on his nutrient needs and can be determined by observing how well he holds its weight; some easy keepers can do fine on just grass hay, while others require a more nutrient-dense hay. Having the hay tested is the only reliable way to determine its nutrient content. Once the owner of an easy keeper has established adequate nutrition and feed volume, he or she should weigh the hay rather than eyeballing or “guesstimating,” in

order to avoid overfeeding.

All horses should be offered free choice water and plain white salt block as well as a red mineral block.

Due to the propensity for horses to develop gastrointestinal upset secondary to abrupt dietary changes, it is imperative that you make any changes in a horse’s diet slowly over the course of several days, even if you’re eliminating components.

Exercise Is Necessary

Generally, easy keepers require daily exercise. Most horses are healthier (and happier) if they are maintained outside 24/7, and such an arrangement might increase their voluntary exercise. However, veterinarians say that instituting an exercise regimen (riding, hand-walking, etc.) is the best way to manage these animals.

Metabolic Syndrome and Insulin Resistance

A concern with overweight easy keepers is the development of metabolic syndrome and insulin resistance. Equine metabolic

syndrome (EMS), or peripheral Cushing's syndrome, is associated with obesity, abnormal fat deposits, and chronic insulin resistance. Insulin resistance (IR) is a condition in which an increased production of insulin is required in order to maintain (or attempt to maintain) circulating blood sugar levels within normal limits. Horses with equine metabolic syndrome and insulin resistance are at an increased risk of developing laminitis.

There is no specific treatment or cure for horses with equine metabolic syndrome or insulin resistance. Treatment is aimed at altering the horse's diet and exercise to limit progression of the disease. Sometimes you must limit or even eliminate access to pasture, especially high-sugar pasture. Turn horses out on overgrazed pastures, use a feeding muzzle on easy keepers during turnout, or turn them out in a sand lot, if available. Low-sugar and low-starch hays are recommended for these horses. You can have the hay analyzed to ensure its sugar content is low (i.e., it contains less than 10-12% soluble sugars). If the sugar content is known or suspected to be high, soak the hay in cold

water for 60 minutes or hot water for 30 minutes to remove some of the sugar before feeding it to your horse.

Eliminate grain, other concentrates, and high-sugar feeds from the diets of these horses. If a horse requires extra fiber or energy, add beet pulp and "low starch" concentrates, respectively, to the diet.

Veterinarians also recommend that owners increase the exercise level of horses with insulin resistance. This involves daily or near daily exercise in the form of hand walking, longeing, long-lining, driving, riding, ponying, or any combination of the above. Simply turning horses out is not considered sufficient exercise. It might not be possible to immediately institute an exercise regime if the horse is suffering from a laminitic episode, for example. In such a case, institute dietary changes, wait for the episode to resolve, then slowly increase your horse's exercise level.

Supplementing the Easy Keeper

Horses usually do not require nutritional supplements if they are fed good-quality hay. Nutritional supplements are widely considered safe; however, owners

FAST FACTS

- Easy keepers are at risk for obesity, equine metabolic syndrome, insulin resistance, and laminitis.
- Routine body condition scoring, dietary modifications, and increased exercise are recommended to ensure horses maintain a healthy body weight.
- Easy keepers generally require only 1.5% of their body weight in hay or forage each day.
- One of the major concerns for easy keepers is the development of laminitis secondary to metabolic syndrome and insulin resistance.
- Management is aimed at optimizing diet and increasing exercise to limit disease progression.

need to be aware that they can oversupplement horses.

Additional Information

Discuss any concerns regarding easy keepers with your veterinarian. Local state-funded agriculture extension specialists are available to provide information on feeding guidelines, pasture management, and testing forages and hay. 🐾

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