



Field Notes

Advice and Information



June 2015

Lightening the load

Top tips to help manage weight loss appropriately

Weight management doesn't need to be a heavyweight subject. In this edition of *Redwings Field Notes* we'll share our top tips to help with some of the trickier situations faced by horse owners. We share some reminders on the basics and give you some tools to help you *put it into practice*. We even do the maths and calculate the daily ration of a dieting pony. Good luck bringing him back into ideal condition!



Frodo finding alternatives to grazing while he's on restricted rations!!

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DiETING dilemmas

We respond to some heavyweight situations

"My pony misses his treats, and he can be persuasive!"

We all know that food is not the only way to our pony's heart, but at Redwings this really is a horse-care mantra and it's never more important than for a pony on a diet. Treats and an extra handful of hay help us say "I love you" but the success of weight management comes down to our self discipline. Why not...

- U Spend more time being tactile? Replacing treats with wither scratches or taking time to learn some basic massage techniques can help take our horse's mind off the reduced rations.
- U Couple a healthy eating plan with additional enrichment to help his mood. Consider alternating your horse's housing, finding a fieldmate or allowing visual contact with other horses.
- U Introduce changes to your management routine gradually? – E.g. give less and less ad lib hay rather than suddenly withdrawing it from his routine.
- U Choose some compensatory tactics to avoid asking your horse to do something on an empty stomach? – For example, give him a small soaked haynet (part of his daily ration) before going on a ride or asking him to stand for the farrier.

"Aren't native breeds and cobs meant to be fatter?"

Cobs and native ponies who tend to be 'good doers' often get it too good! Descended from ponies living in harsh climates, a 'thrifty gene' is to blame for their stubborn chunkiness so we've got to be extra clever at keeping them in tip-top shape! What about...

- U Reassessing what we think a *healthy* cob or native looks like, fit not fat.
- U Accurately assessing body condition and your horse's ideal weight. Try not to overestimate exercise levels and calorific needs. Get the kitchen scales and weigh food accurately.
- U Rug smart – does he need it? If so, rug according to temperatures rather than seasons. Remove rugs on milder days.
- U Know your pasture – our paddocks often provide rich grazing beyond the requirements of our hardy breeds. Testing nutritional content of forage can help.
- U Tackle rich grazing – consider topping paddocks (don't forget to remove cut grass) or arranging to have a friend's horse graze your paddock before you turn out.



"I can't split them up"

Bonds form quickly between fieldmates and it can be too late to rethink the compatibility of a Shetland companion with a thoroughbred. Ask yourself ...

- U Can your grazing be managed even more with the chunkier chap in mind? Then his trimmer friend can have a compound feed if necessary.
- U Can you consider building time away from the bonded fieldmate for parts of the day? At Redwings we let chunkier friends take forage with the herd but bring them off the grazing for part of the day.
- U How can you build more regular short walks in-hand into your routine? Have you tried lunging or long reining the companion pony? Exercise is key.
- U Can you encourage more exercise by increasing the distance between forage? Ten minutes of grazing is equivalent to an hour of walking!
- U Can you soak hay for 12-16 hours to extract the water-soluble sugars and reduce calorie content?
- U Can you consider introducing a grazing muzzle for a few hours a day? But make sure grazing is restricted when the muzzle is off. Ponies can be clever and binge eat! Seek advice to help you introduce, fit and monitor its use correctly.

"My pony needs box rest"

A horse at rest is susceptible to gaining weight – a reason why *podgy ponies* are particularly vulnerable – but what can you do with a dieter who is exercise-restricted for veterinary reasons?

- U Start by re-evaluating everything from nutrition to feeding practices and stimulation (find alternatives to food to stave off boredom).
- U Feed hay with lower nutritional value (not to be confused with poor quality) and supplement with a balancer to ensure he gets the full range of vitamins and minerals to make a full recovery.
- U Encourage little and often; divide the daily ration across three haynets (small-holed or double-netted for extra work).
- U Enhance his experience at rest with mirrors, toys and giving a good view of the goings-on around the yard.
- U He may not continue to shed pounds but you can pat yourself on the back if he's turned back out with the same condition score as before.



Weigh your hay!

Bales of forage can vary considerably in weight; one study found a variation between 13 and 27kg!



Your turn! Putting it into practice

Your goal is to maintain a body condition score of 3 all year round. As with humans, weight watching is a process of constantly rebalancing calorie intake and energy used and horses and ponies will fluctuate throughout the year with changing exercise and nutritional content in their grazing and forage.

Take the following simple steps to keep on top of it...

- ✓ **Daily** - weigh your rations and restrict grazing appropriately.
- ✓ **Weekly** - monitor weight fluctuations using the same weigh tape.
- ✓ **Monthly** - body condition score accurately. Don't be tempted to do it by eye! Assess your exercise regime.
- ✓ **Seasonally** - only rug when necessary and keep an eye out for spring grass growth and restrict grazing appropriately.



Start by knowing the daily ration for your horse...

What's their body condition score?

3.5 or higher = 1.5% of BW
(go to the calculator below to lose weight)

3 = 2% of BW
(Ideal! - maintain weight)

2.5 or lower = 2.5% of BW
(you'll need to consider supportive feeding)

BW = bodyweight

Your handy ration calculator for a diETING horse or pony off grass (no hard feed needed!)

Getting your forage analysed by an equine nutritionist can help you find the right balancer to complement it.

To find your horse's daily weight-loss ration work through the steps below...



Step 1 - use a weigh tape (or weighbridge if you can) to work out your horse's weight as accurately as possible.

Step 2 - find the nearest corresponding weight and track right to see what your daily forage ration should be.

Step 3 - decide how many meals to split the ration into and weigh accordingly!

Weigh hay not water! Remember always weigh dry weight! (Soak or moisten afterwards)



Step 4 - consider an optional balancer to replace lost nutrients in restricted grazing or to appease feed-dependent fatties

Step 5 - let the weight loss begin!

Horse Weight	Total daily forage ration (1.5% of bodyweight)	2 meals a day (kg per sitting)	3 meals a day (kg per sitting)	Optional balancer
200kg	3kg	1.5kg	1kg	200g
250kg	3.8kg	1.9kg	1.3kg	250g
300kg	4.5kg	2.25kg	1.5kg	300g
350kg	5.3kg	2.65kg	1.8kg	350g
400kg	6kg	3kg	2kg	400g
450kg	6.6kg	3.3kg	2.2kg	450g
500kg	7.5kg	3.75kg	2.5kg	500g
550kg	8.3kg	4.15kg	2.76kg	550g
600kg	9kg	4.5kg	3kg	600g
650kg	9.6kg	4.8kg	3.2kg	650g
700kg	10.5kg	5.25kg	3.5kg	700g

Your horse's mini weight-loss record

Name: _____ Body Condition Score _____

Today's Date: ___/___/___ _____

1 month later: ___/___/___ _____

2 months later: ___/___/___ _____

3 months later: ___/___/___ _____

Redwings says...

"Remember that your horse's clinical condition and management needs may differ from the otherwise healthy horse, so take advice of a vet. Only ever go below a ration of 1.5% of bodyweight if they advise it! :-)"

Feeding fundamentals

Getting support

- Every horse is different; your vet and an equine nutritionist can give you tailor-made advice.
- Get your hay analysed. Most feed companies will be happy to do this for you. Choose hay that has less than 12% WSC (water soluble carbohydrates) and is as low in calories as possible.
- Talk to an agronomist (a soil management expert) about your grass. Some types of grass are higher in calories than others. Yes really!
- Many feed companies offer FREE assessments.

Managing weight loss

- Remember this simple sum: fewer calories + more exercise = weight loss! Consider everything that goes into your horse's mouth. Cubes, mixes, apples, carrots, treats, grass – the lot!
- Weigh your horse using a weighbridge or weigh tape and body condition score regularly. No weigh tape? A normal tape-measure is a good substitute and will show fluctuations in weight. It can also be really helpful to keep a photographic record so you can monitor changes.
- Weigh all feeds (dry – before moistening or soaking), including hay, according to what your vet or nutritionist has advised. Do not go a single gram over! Most feed companies are happy to give free advice.
- If anybody else looks after your horse from time to time, make sure they stick to the rules and don't give your horse any sneaky treats on the side.
- Soak hay for 12-16 hours in tepid water to reduce calorie content further.
- Use wood shavings as bedding – not straw. Horses may eat straw, meaning they'll be consuming unwanted extra calories.
- Try strip grazing between May and September (when grass sugar levels are high). Try not to move the tape too soon or you could undermine all your hard work and remember to take caution! Herd members may compete with each other for this new grass, meaning chances of injury are higher.

Health warnings

- Any changes to your horse's diet must be done gradually. A 'safe' rate of weight loss is around 1% of body mass per week.
- Make sure your horse is getting enough vitamins and minerals by feeding a balancer supplement, even if he is overweight.
- Horses are trickle-feeders. No access to food for long periods of time can cause stomach ulcers and behavioural problems.



pudding before



pudding after

Meet Pudding!

Age: 10 years **Breed:** Welsh cross

Height: 10.2hh

Left to chomp away on lush pasture to his heart's content with friends Custard, Banoffee, Sorbet and Trifle, the aptly named Pudding arrived at Redwings dangerously overweight (BCS 4 - 4.5) in 2008.

Although his stubborn weight didn't cause him any obvious veterinary issues, his obesity was inevitably putting undue pressure on his joints and internal systems. Since arrival he had been out on a grass-only and strip-grazed diet and yet he was not losing weight. Redwings' vets intervened and blood tests confirmed he had Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS) making it very difficult for him to lose weight, and most worryingly, leaving him at risk of laminitis.

When grazing, ponies can eat up to 5% of their body weight in a 24-hour period, yet Pudding needed his daily food intake to be restricted to 1.5%. This meant gradually introducing four x 1.1kg haynets a day and continuing his 'no hard feed or treats' ban. He spent four months on a woodchip paddock so his diet could be closely monitored and enjoyed daily in-hand walking and horse interaction with his fieldmate as well as weighing sessions on the scales fortnightly.

Pudding managed to lose weight to BCS 3 and has moved on to a new life in a Redwings Guardian home. Pudding may not be able to tell us, but at BCS 3 and with his EMS under control he'll be happier, healthier and at much lower risk of laminitis and a range of serious chronic illnesses.

Well done Pudding!



Related Redwings advice and information

- Body condition scoring
- EMS
- Laminitis
- Winter and summer horse care
- Grazing muzzles



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