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Feeding for Weight Gain

It is important to follow your Veterinarian's instructions for your horse as each case is different. Make sure to find out what kind of feed your horse should be given. These decisions may be made based on preexisting conditions such as Cushing's disease, laminitis, etc. Be certain your horse's diet is balanced with appropriate vitamins and minerals. This may be accomplished by using a feed that has a good balance to begin with, or by adding a supplement to account for things that are not incorporated into hay or whole grains.

Begin the process by obtaining a weight for your horse. For our purposes, a weight tape will provide a good approximation. Get comfortable putting the tape on in the same place each time so that the measurements can be reliably compared from one time to the next. Record your horse's starting weight on a calendar in the barn where it is easy to see and handy to record each observation. You will be weighing your horse every 2 to 4 weeks. It is also good to assign a body condition score at this time. If you are unfamiliar with doing this, just ask the Vet; we will be happy to go over it with you and to provide a body condition score chart.

Hay is the mainstay of a horse's energy intake. Make sure that the hay is of good quality and high in feed value. Feed value is determined by testing to identify the calorie content. The rule of thumb for maintaining weight in an adult horse is to feed 2% of their body weight per day in dry hay. This equates to 20# for a 1000# horse. To gain weight, the amount of hay needs to be closer to 3% or 30# of hay for a 1000# horse. You must weigh your hay to be sure you are feeding the correct amount. A fish scale works well to weigh a hay bag, or to hang a platform from on which to place hay for weighing.

If you are combining more than one feed, such as equine senior and whole oats, ask the Veterinarian what the best ratio is for increasing the feed. Initially it is not necessary to weigh the volume of grain, but this will become important as we continue to add more so it is a good habit to get into now.

Plan:

- 1) If hay is not at 3% of body weight, increase by 5# per week until 3% is achieved*
- 2) Start with your current grain and add one more handful of grain daily every 3-4 days (twice weekly)*

If feeding twice or more daily, alternate between adding to day or night feedings

- 3) Weigh your horse every 2-4 weeks. If your horse has:*
 - Stayed at the same weight = continue to add as directed above*
 - Gained weight = Stop adding grain and re-weigh in 2 weeks*

**if still gaining = re-weigh every 2 weeks until weight gain plateaus*

**if weight gain plateaus and desired body condition has not been*

reached = resume adding as in #2

- Lost weight = do not be concerned if slight loss or no gain is achieved in the first 4 to 6 weeks. If weight loss is seen after that, call the office and talk to the Vet.

4) When your horse's ideal body condition score has been achieved, stop adding feed, but continue to weigh every 4 weeks.

- When weight goes up, decrease grain slowly over a 2 week period and reduce by 1/2 the amount of grain that had been added.

- After grain reduction, reduce hay to 2% of body weight if your horse is still gaining weight

- If weight gain continues, remove 1 handful of grain weekly until gain stops

5) Continue to monitor horse's weight monthly for 1 year and then every 3 months after that.

- Tweak feeding schedule as needed to keep in ideal body condition score range

Be Aware:

Green grass and pasture can dramatically alter the feeding directions above. Hay feeding instructions are given as dry weight while grass can be high in water content. Early in the spring, grass can be very high in sugar calories which may be bad for horses with laminitis or founder. Consult with a Veterinarian on how or whether grazing should be incorporated into your feeding plan given your situation.

Sometimes large volumes of feed need to be given in order to get the weight gain process started. It is important to monitor closely so that you do not overshoot the mark and end up with an obesity issue. Slow and steady weight gain or loss is much healthier than yo-yo-ing up and down.

Vegetable oil is a good source of calories that most horses tolerate well. Some feeds such as Equine Senior are high in fats so minimal supplementation is required. For the purposes of weight gain, any of the clear cooking vegetable oils can be used such as corn, soybean or canola oils. Start with 1 teaspoon per feeding and increase by 1 more teaspoon per feeding once weekly. Horses can tolerate up to 1 cup twice daily.

It is hard for a horse to consume and process more than 15# of grain/concentrate per day. This is why it is important to weigh the grain that you are feeding. If you get to 15#'s and your horse is not gaining or not to their ideal body condition score yet, call the office and talk to the Veterinarian.

There are many ways of feeding a horse. *These instructions provide a simple way of approaching a horse with a low body condition score. It is important to make sure that your horse does not have any preexisting conditions that would hinder an aggressive feeding program. Dental conditions and heart disease as well as Cushing's and laminitis are just a few of the problems that we see on a regular basis. As always, we are happy to consult with you on the optimal plan for your horse. Please call with any questions.*