

Fattening Up a Thin Horse

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Occasionally a horse is purchased or arrives for training or agistment in poor condition. **Its condition may not be suitable for the work or purpose planned for it. A horse that has over-wintered on poor pasture without a rug or a shelter may also lose weight due to inadequate feed intake to meet its needs.** Other horses lose condition or are poor doers (hard keepers) despite seemingly adequate rations. A young nervy, hyperactive horse or one that frets when confined to a stable or yard requires more energy to maintain its condition as compared to a quiet, mature horse. An aged horse with poor teeth condition may also lose weight as it is unable to chew hay or pasture or becomes unwell due to infected teeth and gums.

Cases of Ill-Thrift

The common signs of ill-thrift (lack of vitality and well-being), or poor condition in horses include a low condition score below 1.0, with a general ribby appearance; a dull, rough coat; failure to thrive, inability to work or perform to expectation, or look their best as well as reduced fertility in breeding horses and a poor growth rate in young horses.

The three common underlying causes of poor condition, in the absence of other obvious signs or history of ill-health, are:

- **Heavy internal parasite burdens**, leading to gut irritation and reduced overall nutrient uptake
- **Teeth problems**, resulting in inefficient chewing to prepare food for small bowel digestion (sharp edges on molar teeth, worn out teeth in aged horses)
- **Inadequate feed**, including insufficient quality and/or quantity of feed (energy and/or protein) to match work, reproduction or growth.
- **Sand accumulation in the hind gut** when grazing short pastures on sandy soils - resulting in reduced nutrient uptake and risk of colic.
- **Chronic disease conditions** – such as respiratory disease, travel sickness, strangles, skin infection, or chronic diarrhoea in aged horses.
- **Gastric ulceration and 'acid heartburn'** – many horses become 'poor doers' "crib biters" and "windsuckers" – which result in time spent windsucking and not eating, as well as have a consistently poor appetite.

Therefore, to help improve the health and general condition of a horse that is in overall poor condition, due attention should be paid to:

- * **Control of parasites** - worming/external treatments
- * **Condition of teeth** - rasping and dental check
- * **Quality and quantity of feed** – improve energy and other nutrient intake.
- * **Treat chronic disease conditions**

The body weight and condition score of a horse should be evaluated relative to its age, build, breed, type of work or use, seasonal influences and general health. In an aged horse, a combination of poor teeth, reduced digestive efficiency and a chronic health problem may result in a gradual loss of condition.

Initially, steps taken to correct the three most common causes of poor condition or failure to thrive - **heavy worm burdens or external parasites, teeth problems and poor quality feed** -should be considered before increasing the energy content by giving a supplement of concentrates in addition to good quality hay.

Basic Guidelines

After a teeth check and routine worming if necessary, the quantity and quality of the feed should be increased, in a step-wise manner over 10-14 days combined with light exercise to ensure a gradual improvement in condition.

Management to Increase Body Weight

1. **Worm the horse** twice 3 weeks apart – the second worming will remove any developing small Redworms released from gut reservoirs following the first worming. Discuss worm control with your vet as a special daily dosing schedule may be worthwhile.
2. **The condition of the teeth** should be checked by qualified horse dentist or a vet, especially in older horses in poor condition or horses that drop (quid) food when eating or are very slow to chew hay.

3. **A thorough health check** by a vet may be necessary to determine any underlying medical cause such as chronic illness, gastric ulcers or a naturally poor appetite. Weight loss is relatively common in the aged horse despite a palatable, good quality ration. Horses with certain vices, such as weaving, stall walking and particularly the windsucking habit, often fail to thrive because of time spent at the habit, rather than eating. Rasping off sharp edges, cutting stepped teeth, extraction of cracked or decayed teeth and realignment of incisor and molar teeth may be required. The teeth should be re-examined in 6 months in aged horses or horses where teeth extraction was necessary.
4. **Loss of condition** often occurs during the 7-10 days after sudden withdrawal of high energy rations when stabled horses are turned out to grass for a rest without a step-wise decrease in concentrate feed. A similar dramatic weight and condition loss, and reduced fertility, can occur in newly introduced mares that are turned out into a group of mares that boss them away from feeders. **Once the underlying cause of the weight loss is investigated and remedied, then a horse can be gradually introduced to a higher energy ration to regain condition. If possible, a stabled horse should be turned out to graze during the day, particularly if it is not accustomed to a stable and frets when confined.**
5. **Plan a step-wise increase in feed intake.** A gradual, step-wise increase in energy and protein levels is recommended to avoid digestive upset and metabolic problems. This increase will provide necessary energy and protein to improve body condition and overall fitness and should be complemented by light exercise to help develop muscle bulk and tone. If the horse has been starved and is hungry, provide 3-4 small feeds daily to avoid overloading the gut if it gorges hard feed. If a hungry horse is turned out onto pasture in a small paddock, it will usually graze continuously and eat the pasture down within a few days. It is important to restrict grazing on lush, spring pasture, or regrowth after rain to one hour each morning and afternoon. A hungry horse will overload its hindgut with soluble carbohydrates and may increase the risk of hindgut acidosis and onset of diarrhoea or laminitis (founder).

Handy Hint:- Carefully manage horses and ponies that have had a previous history of laminitis or founder – See Factsheet number 1.

6. **Provide adequate roughage.** Always provide good quality hay for a horse or pony to fill up on before turning it out onto lush pasture. When a horse is put onto an improved ration to increase its condition and weight, it is wise to provide an opportunity for exercise each day to help maintain its appetite, reduce playful behaviour, and risk of metabolic upset. Preferably walk a newly acquired horse in poor condition for 15-20 minutes, if time permits so that it becomes accustomed to its surroundings. Hard or prolonged exercise will limit the rate of weight increase, especially in a horse that has been neglected or starved.
7. **Horses with a history of poor appetite** and a vice such as ‘cribbing’ and ‘windsucking’ may benefit from a daily supplement of **Kohnkes Own Gastro-Coat** to maintain a natural protective coating to the upper stomach lining to minimise any discomfort that could limit the appetite.
8. **Introduce gradual exercise.** The ration and exercise program should be carried out over a six to eight week period, with care to avoid over supply of energy which can result in metabolic upsets, such as founder, ‘tying-up’ and excitable behaviour. In young growing horses that have experienced a set-back in development, care should be taken to avoid sudden spurts of growth by feeding excess amounts of high energy rations.
9. **Keep the horse calm.** A hard feed, based on steamed or rolled barley, dampened rice bran, or a high energy ‘cool’ extruded feed at the rate of 500g to 750g/100kg body weight, mixed with an equal volume of chaff, in addition to the normal maintenance ration of hay or pasture for an adult lightly worked horse, will help achieve a steady weight gain without making the horse playful or difficult to handle. A supplement of vitamins and trace minerals such as Kohnke’s Own **Cell-Vital®** or **Cell-Provide®**, mixed into the feed daily will help to ensure vitality, coat condition and general health as weight is gained.
10. **Keep the horse warm.** Provide a light weight lined rug under cold conditions, especially in horses that are kept outdoors under cool winter or wet conditions. Ensure the rug has a long tail flap to above the hocks to prevent cold air drawing heat from the lower belly area as horses usually stand with their backs to the breeze. Heat loss saps energy away from weight gain.

Handy Hint: When the horse regains condition, topline can be improved by a course of Kohnkes Own Muscle XL for 10-14 days, combined with exercise to aid muscle development.

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