

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 which 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 nervous, hyperactive horse or one which 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.

Causes of Ill-Thrift

The common signs of 'ill-thrift' in horses include a low condition score below 2.0 with a general 'ribby' appearance; a dull, rough coat; failure to thrive; inability to work or perform to expectation or look their best, (lack of vitality and well-being), as well as reduced fertility in breeding horses and poor growth rate in young horses.

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

- **Heavy internal parasite burdens**, especially large populations of adult developing Small Redworms (Cyathostomes) or encysted Small Redworms (Cyathostomiasis) in the large bowel wall, leading to gut irritation and reduced overall nutrient uptake. Refer to Fact Sheet M9 for a comprehensive review of worm control. Infestation with lice in the winter time, which cause rubbing and reduced grazing time is also a common problem during the winter season.
- **Teeth problems**, resulting in inefficient chewing to reduce food particles to an optimum size for 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, especially after drought or the break of the season, most commonly in horses 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, chronic diarrhoea or advanced melanoma or other cancers in aged horses.
- **Gastric and duodenal ulceration** – many horses become 'poor doers' "crib biters" and "windsuckers" - which result in time spent windsucking and not eating, as well as a poor appetite, which in turn causes them to not eat an adequate amount of feed to meet their needs.

Handy Hint

Investigate Common Reasons for Poor 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.

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

- **Control of parasites** - worming/external treatments
- **Condition of teeth** - rasping and a 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. **Refer to Fact Sheet N1.**

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. In severe worm burdens indicated by a high faecal egg count, worm encysted with a larval active wormer such as fenbendazole 100g/L at 50mL per 100kg bodyweight daily for 5 days, or Moxidectin as a single dose. The second worming will remove any developing Small Redworms released from gut reservoirs following the first worming. **Refer to Fact Sheet M9** for more details on a strategic worming program.
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 which 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 aged horses 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 re-alignment of incisor and molar teeth may be required. The teeth should be re-examined every 6 months in aged horses or in horses where teeth extraction was necessary.
4. **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 re-growth after rain to one hour each morning and afternoon. A hungry horse can quickly overload its hindgut with soluble carbohydrates and may increase the risk of hindgut acidosis and onset of diarrhoea or laminitis (founder). **Hint: Carefully manage horses and ponies that have had a previous history of laminitis or founder - Refer to Factsheet No C2.**

5. **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 which has been neglected or starved.
6. **Horses with a history of poor appetite** and a vice such as 'cribbing' and 'windsucking' may benefit from a daily supplement of **Kohnke's Own Gastro-Coat®** to help maintain normal digestive function and the appetite. **Note: Refer to Fact Sheet C6 for a review of Gastric Ulcers**
7. **Introduce exercise gradually.** The increase in 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 which 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, as it may increase the risk of joint problems, including epiphysitis and OCD.

8. **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®, Cell-Provide®** or **Aussie Sport™** mixed into the feed daily will help to ensure vitality, coat condition and general health as weight is gained. Avoid feeding a large bulk of hay as it may interfere with the digestion of concentrates and result in a reduced rate of weight gain.
9. **Keep the horse warm.** Provide a light weight, lined rug under cold conditions, especially for horses which 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

Withdrawal of High Energy Working Rations

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 which are turned out into a group of mares which 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.

Handy Hint

Building Topline

When the horse regains condition, topline can be improved by a course of **Kohnke's Own Muscle-XL®** for 10-14 days, combined with exercise, to aid muscle development.

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