

Swiftsure Equine Veterinary Services

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Feeding For Weight Gain

Getting horses to gain weight is not as simple as providing a smorgasbord of food for them and letting them eat. It starts with determining why they are underweight and then addressing as many contributing factors as possible. Taking into account the horse's current health, possible future complications and disease predispositions, we can generate a feeding plan.

Firstly, we want to avoid the re-feeding syndrome in which the horse develops potentially life threatening cardiac effects. It usually occurs within a week on their new feeding program and is associated with electrolyte imbalances from feeding high levels of non-structural carbohydrates (NSC). Moreover, high levels of NSCs, along with starch and fructans, may predispose a horse to developing laminitis. So, it is very important to have your hay analyzed for low NSC content, and avoid feeding pellets and grains. Gradually, you can introduce pellets and other grains, over the course of 10 to 14 days.

See our Hay Analysis section for further details.

Weight gain can be better achieved through fat such as oils. Again, this has to be gradually introduced, as horses cannot store the bile acids necessary for digestion. Instead, the liver must be stimulated to increase the production of bile acids over time, requiring a number weeks to achieve.

Our geriatric horses, those with poor or even no functional dentition, are the most susceptible to being underweight. In these cases, we focus on mash diets that meet all of their nutritional needs.

Some key factors in developing a customized feeding plan include:

- ✓ Senior horses have an increased need for protein, phosphorus and fiber
- ✓ Mash diets should be fed in multiple small quantities throughout the day (4-6 feedings per day)
- ✓ Senior horses may be low ranked in the herd hierarchy and chased off their highly desirable feed
- ✓ Some horses eat better if fed alongside their companions
- ✓ Senior horses with poor dentition may take longer to eat, and may require breaks
- ✓ Senior horses with osteoarthritis pain may need to be fed from a raised position and on soft ground
- ✓ Eating from hay nets may be difficult, depending on their dental condition

Here is a list of some of the feed suggestions to encourage weight gain:

- ✓ Low NSC hay, if the horses have adequate functional dentition

- ✓ If they don't, hay can be chopped to make it easier to chew
- ✓ Soaked hay cubes or pellets such as alfalfa or timothy
- ✓ Soaked beet pulp or Fibermax (rinsed thoroughly after adequate soaking)
- ✓ Vegetable oils, gradually increased
- ✓ High fat pellets such as Fat Smart, Step 8, Equi-Cal, preferably softened
- ✓ High fiber or senior pellets such as Fiber-Smart, Step 6, Pro-Fibre Crunch, preferably softened
- ✓ Vitamin & Mineral supplement such as MV Balancer, Step 7, Island Horse, Dr Reeds, Triple Crown, All-Phase
- ✓ Feeds with anti-inflammatory or anti-oxidant properties such as Flax, Hemp and Vitamin E
- ✓ Fresh grass ONLY if low NSC content

It is integral to consult your veterinarian before implementing a feeding program for weight gain in order to avoid putting your horse at additional health risks.