

Swiftsure Equine Veterinary Services

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Feeding For Weight Loss

The general principles of weight loss are:

- ✓ Feed low NSC hay at 1.5-2% body weight (BW)
- ✓ Avoid grazing and treats such as carrots and apples
- ✓ Avoid high calorie feeds such as certain pellets, grains, oils, and beet pulp
- ✓ Exercise daily that encourages calorie burning
- ✓ Avoid fasting your horse for too many hours in the day
- ✓ Set realistic weight loss goals and monitor weight loss regularly

Feed low NSC hay at 1.5-2% body weight (BW)

Most of our island hay is too high in Non-Structural Carbohydrates (NSC). Hay analysis is the only way to determine your hay's NSC concentration. For weight loss, we ideally want to feed a hay that is 12% NSC or less. If your hay is significantly greater than that, soaking it in fresh water for 1 to 2 hours can reduce the sugar concentration by as much as 30%. Make sure to change the water between soakings.

If you can exercise your horse, we reduce the quantity of hay to 2% BW for an average horse with an average metabolic rate. Measuring quantity of hay by flakes is incorrect, as size and weights of flakes vary between bales and types of hay. The only reliable way to measure hay is by weight, using a feed or luggage scale. For example, 2% BW for a 1000lb horse is equal to 20lbs daily (1.5% BW = 15lbs).

For the first 6 to 8 weeks on our diet plan, we often feed hay at 2% BW. If we are not achieving our goals, we must increase the amount of exercise or decrease the amount of hay to 1.5% BW. If after another 6 to 8 weeks, we still are not seeing appropriate weight loss, we can further reduce the quantity of hay to 1.25% BW. Consultation with your veterinarian at this point is strongly advised as there may be other factors contributing to the lack of weight loss.

Avoid grazing and treats such as carrots and apples

All grazing should be avoided, or at most, limited to 5 to 10 minutes of hand grazing. Limiting pasture time to only a few hours or part day does not have any benefit as horses will begin compensatory grazing, consuming just as much grass as if they had

all day turnout. Another option is a grazing muzzle. This will allow turnout, while limiting their grass consumption. Make sure they know how to drink while wearing it.

Apples, carrots, mints, sugar cubes, “Stud Muffins” and all other treats count as calories, and they contribute to the NSC portion of your horse’s diet. Try to provide other types of rewards such as neck scratches or hand walks. If you must give a treat, it best be a high protein treat such as a couple timothy or alfalfa cubes.

Avoid high calorie feeds such as certain pellets, grains, oils, and beet pulp

Although this seems self explanatory, all of these processed feeds contribute unnecessary calories to your horse’s diet. If you must give something in order to mix in a supplement or medication, limit it to a handful of a low calorie pellet, moistened, or rinsed beet pulp.

Exercise daily that encourages calorie burning

Horses are naturally very athletic animals and it requires more exercise than one would expect to increase their heart rates and burn calories. If your horse is healthy enough to exercise (not suffering from a disease or illness), they should be exercised vigorously enough to elevate their heart and respiratory rates. The exercise program and length should reflect their fitness level.

Avoid fasting your horse for too many hours in the day

Horses’ digestive tracts are designed to be eating very limited amounts of feed on an almost continual basis. The quality of their feedstuffs is also usually very low. This contrasts our conventional feeding management. Horses should be fed very small very frequent meals (4 to 6 per day) and their rate of consumption should be delayed by placing the hay into slow feeder nets.

Set realistic weight loss goals and monitor weight loss regularly

A weight loss plan is a long term commitment. Our goal should be to lose approximately 1 to 2% BW per month. This will vary depending on your horse’s obesity, health status, age etc. and thus consultation with your veterinarian is advised. It should take between 4-6 months to achieve an ideal weight.

Weight loss should be monitored every 2 weeks. In order to assess the progress, one should purchase a weight tape. The actual number on the weight tape is less important than the change in weight between measurements. In addition, the location of measurement is also less important than the consistency of location. (You can measure the girth circumference anywhere along your horse’s back, as long as you use the same location, using the same tape measure every time.)