TENNESSEE
Equine Hospital

The Easy-Keeper

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A horse in ideal body condition will have a flat back with a thin covering of fat over the ribs without a cresty neck, crease down the back, or fat deposits at the tail head. Overweight "easy-keepers" may have increased problems with arthritis, exercise intolerance, and even founder. The first step in the battle of the bulge is to evaluate the feed. Weight control involves balancing calories ingested with calories utilized. The mainstay of any horse's diet should be roughage in the form of grass, hay, or complete feeds. Adult horses in low to moderate work often maintain, or exceed, a healthy weight on pasture or hay alone.

Is your horse getting to much pasture? Limiting grazing time or using grazing muzzles are good options for that heavy-weight grazer especially with the lush grass this year. Many horses tolerate grazing muzzles remarkably well, and can wear them all day if needed. Also, make sure you are not overfeeding hay. An average horse usually needs 1-1.5% of its body weight in forage. Since hay varies considerably, weighing hay meals and testing the nutritional value of large batches of hay help you feed more accurately. Hay nets can make smaller amounts of hay last longer for demanding eaters. These horses don't needs much, if any, grain. Ration balancer supplements are a great alternative to provide the vitamins, minerals, and protein that may be lacking, and gives them something to eat at "grain" time instead of high calorie feeds.

Diet changes and weight loss need to occur gradually. Use a weight tape and assess your horse's body condition every 2 weeks keeping track of these measurements. Don't forget regular exercise as part of the solution for weight loss too! Contact your veterinarian for help in assessing your horse's body condition. If diet and exercise changes do not help your horse achieve a healthy weight, your veterinarian may suggest testing for a possible underlying endocrine disorder.