

# Feeding Easy Keepers

*Horses that maintain their weight easily are prone to obesity, laminitis, and metabolic issues*

## Overview

The term “easy keepers” refers to horses and ponies that maintain or gain weight on a minimum amount of food. While easy keepers are widely considered a joy to own in terms of feed costs, the downside is their potential for obesity, laminitis, and metabolic issues.

Overfeeding a horse is hard on his musculoskeletal system, is contraindicated if he has osteoarthritis, decreases his athletic stamina, interferes with heat dissipation, and can contribute to metabolic syndrome, insulin resistance, and laminitis. Owners of easy keepers should routinely perform body condition scoring and modify feeding regimens to ensure these horses maintain a healthy body weight.

## Body Condition Score

Easy keepers have a tendency to be overweight. One of the contributing factors (besides metabolism) to obesity in horses is that owners often fail to recognize what constitutes a healthy body condition score (BCS). While various body condition scoring systems exist, scoring does not have to be a complicated or time-consuming process.

Horses at an appropriate body weight have rib and hip bones that are not visible, but easily felt. In contrast, a horse is considered overweight if:<sup>1,2</sup>

- His ribs are difficult to feel with firm digital pressure;
- He has a “cresty” neck;
- His withers are rounded and covered in fat;
- The saddle and girth make indents in his fat when positioned;
- His shoulder blades are not easily seen;



Easy keepers have a tendency to be overweight and might be at risk for developing equine metabolic syndrome and/or insulin resistance.

- The area surrounding his tailhead is bulging or feels soft; and
- His inner thighs are in contact more than a quarter of the way down the inner thigh region when he is standing square.

## Forage-Only Diets for Easy Keepers

Horses require six basic classes of nutrients in their diets: Water, carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins, and minerals. Forage alone (grass and/or hay) can meet the dietary needs of most horses not involved in moderate to heavy work.<sup>3</sup>

You can offer forage either free-choice or as a daily ration. A healthy adult horse requires 1.5-2.5% of his body weight in hay per day. Easy keepers generally require only 1.5% of their body weight in hay each day. Thus, an average 1,000-pound easy keeper only needs 15 pounds of hay daily. The quality of the hay the horse requires depends on his nutrient needs and can be determined by observing how well he holds his weight; some easy keepers can do fine on just grass hay, while others require hay that is more nutrient-dense. Having the hay tested is the only reliable

way to determine its nutrient content. For more information on hay analysis, contact your state's local equine extension specialist or check out [www.extension.org/pages/Hay-Analysis-Its-Importance-and-Interpretation](http://www.extension.org/pages/Hay-Analysis-Its-Importance-and-Interpretation).

Once you have established adequate nutrition and feed volume, weigh your easy keeper's hay rather than simply eyeballing or “guesstimating.” This is an integral step to avoid overfeeding.

All horses should be offered free choice water and a plain white salt block as well as a red mineral block.

Remember that horses can experience gastrointestinal upset secondary to abrupt dietary changes. Make any changes to a horse's diet slowly over the course of several days, even if you're eliminating components.

## Metabolic Syndrome and Insulin Resistance

Overweight easy keepers are at risk for developing equine metabolic syndrome (EMS) and/or insulin resistance (IR). EMS is associated with obesity, abnormal fat deposits, and chronic insulin resistance. IR is a condition in which an increased production of insulin is required in order to maintain (or attempt to maintain) circulating blood sugar levels within normal limits. Horses with EMS/IR have a higher chance of developing laminitis than other, non-EMS/IR horses.<sup>4</sup>

There is no specific treatment or cure for horses with EMS/IR. Instead of relying solely on pharmaceutical drugs, treatment is aimed at altering the horse's diet and instituting a strict exercise regime to limit disease progression.

## Diet

Easy keepers' pasture access should be limited in some way during the spring and fall when the grasses tend to be highest in their sugar/starch content. Avoid turning easy keepers out on overgrazed pastures, especially during these periods of rapid growth, because the shorter grasses often accumulate more sugar and starch during periods of stress. The grasses should be at least three to four inches tall (fully mature and, therefore, lower caloric content), but mowed to eliminate any seed heads (grain). Grazing muzzles also can be used to restrict intake.<sup>6</sup>

Low-sugar and low-starch hays are recommended for easy keepers. Again, go that extra mile and have the hay analyzed to ensure its sugar content is low (i.e., the hay contains less than 10-12% soluble sugars). If the sugar content is either known or suspected to be high, soak the hay in cold water for 60 minutes or hot water for 30 minutes to remove some of the sugar before feeding it to your horse (be sure to drain the water before feeding the horse).

Eliminate grain and other concentrated feeds and high-sugar feeds from easy

keepers' diets. If a horse needs to consume extra fiber or energy, try adding beet pulp and "low starch" concentrates, respectively, to the diet.

## Exercise

Veterinarians also recommend owners increase the exercise level of overweight horses or those with EMS/IR. This involves daily or near daily exercise in the form of hand walking, longeing, long-lining, driving, riding, ponying, or any combination of the above. Simply turning horses out is not considered sufficient exercise. In some cases it might not be possible to immediately institute an exercise regime (if the horse is suffering from a laminitic episode, for example). In such cases, institute the dietary changes first, wait for the episode to resolve, then slowly increase the horse's exercise level.

## Supplementing the Easy Keeper

Horses usually do not require nutritional supplements if they are fed good quality hay. Nutritional supplements are widely considered safe; however, be aware that you can oversupplement horses.

## Additional Information

Discuss easy keeper concerns with your veterinarian. Contact your local agriculture extension specialist for free information on feeding guidelines, pasture management, and testing forages and hay. 🐾

## KEY REFERENCES

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*Further reading, free nutrition e-newsletter:* [www.TheHorse.com/body-condition](http://www.TheHorse.com/body-condition).

*Adult horse weight estimation tool:* [www.TheHorse.com/Tool/Weight-Calculator.aspx](http://www.TheHorse.com/Tool/Weight-Calculator.aspx)

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