

The Truth Behind Your "Easy Keeper" - Equine Metabolic Syndrome

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All horse people know what an "easy keeper" is: a horse that resembles an LP tank on legs and seems to get fat eating nothing but air. The truth is, an "easy keeper" isn't just a cute chubby horse anymore. It is actually a horse with a very serious disease called Equine Metabolic Syndrome and leaves horses very susceptible to developing a variety of health problems including laminitis (founder).

Obesity is a very common medical problem affecting the modern horse world today. Horses are being fed high-calorie diets that are horribly excessive in relation to their actual dietary needs and physical activity levels. Horses evolved as grazing herbivores with forage (wild and native grasses) as their main energy source. Horses developed a survival mechanism to be able to use their dietary intake very efficiently during periods of environmental stress (winter, drought). However, when thrown too many calories in combination with reduced physical activity (stall confinement), horses can quickly become "easy keepers".

Horses that suffer from Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS) are those that have excess body fat that develops in "classic" locations along the crest of the neck, over the withers and tail head, and in the sheaths of geldings and stallions. Mares suffering from EMS will often have very irregular heat cycles and be difficult to get pregnant. Why is this extra weight so dangerous?

These extra fat cells are more than just unsightly to look at. Research is now showing that these fat cells actually secrete hormones that interfere with a variety of processes in the horse's body, including the action of insulin. Horses affected with EMS have persistently elevated blood sugar levels because they become insulin resistant and unable to efficiently regulate their blood sugar (similar to a human with adult-onset diabetes mellitus). Body tissues that are not used to this elevated blood sugar are damaged over time, including blood vessels. Blood pressure is not regulated correctly, and blood flow to tissues is often decreased, and this decreased blood flow is thought to be why these horses are prone to developing laminitis.

The concept behind treating the disease is simple though the results often aren't: less calories and more exercise. This is often difficult to do, as many times this condition isn't recognized until the horse has already developed laminitis or front-end stiffness and is too painful to be exercised. It is important to recognize that your horse is overweight and get them on a correct diet and path to losing weight before they develop laminitis and other health problems associated with the disease. Horses can be suffering from EMS and the associated health problems long before they develop laminitis, so don't wait until it is too late to do something about it.

Due to the condition of insulin resistance, horses with EMS are very sensitive to sugar and starch and the key is limiting these substances from the diet. Taking grain products out of the diet and switching to a hay only feeding regimen has improved horses comfort with laminitic pain in a matter of a few days. Forbidden food includes any kind of grain or pelleted feed (including senior feeds, complete feeds, etc.), apples, carrots, wheat bran, molasses/sweet feeds, and fresh grass or grass clippings.

Hay for horses with EMS should ideally contain less than 10% sugar and starch. The sugar content of hay is influenced predominantly by the growing stage/condition when it was cut and the drying process, and not necessarily by the type of hay. Fresh grass always contains more sugar as the stored sugar in the cut grass is used as it dries and cures to hay. Horses with EMS can be turned out on pasture for exercise as long as they are wearing a grazing muzzle and are prevented from eating grass! The best way to determine if the hay is suitable is to have it analyzed by a laboratory for the carbohydrate content.

If you think your horse may be suffering from Equine Metabolic Syndrome, it is important to contact your veterinarian and get help in designing a correct feeding program. Restricting food intake too quickly and drastically can also cause serious health problems, so it is important to analyze each horse individually and decide the best course of action to help them lose the weight. The best way to keep your horse healthy is to watch their weight closely, provide them with plenty of exercise, and prevent the problem before it occurs.

