



Many owners don't actually know how much they are feeding their horses each day, and overweight horses are the result.

# Feeding Metabolic and 'Easy Keeper' Horses

Here are tips for veterinarians so you can better advise horse owners about feeding these nutritionally at-risk equids.

By Katie Navarra

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**T**racking calories, counting points or logging the servings of protein/fruits/vegetables/carbohydrates consumed in a day are part of all human dieting programs. Keeping horses at an ideal weight for their breed, age and level of work isn't all that different—except that it is so tempting to throw horses an extra flake of hay or

another (small) scoop of feed. Convincing horse owners their horses are easy keepers and prone to becoming overweight can be challenging.

For Laurie Lawrence, PhD, one of the best sounds in the world is “munch, munch munch” in the barn. The University of Kentucky professor of equine nutrition feels the pain of horse owners who like to feed their horses and love to

hear their horses chewing happily.

“Some horses will become militant and bang their feed tub when they run out of food,” she said.

Following a strict diet isn't just about controlling weight. Diabetics must watch their sugar levels. People suffering from gout have to avoid certain foods. Similarly, horses diagnosed with mild insulin dysregulation, equine metabolic syn-



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**Starting a dialogue is the first step in creating a team approach for establishing a horse's nutritional plan.**

drome, PPID or glycogen storage defects require special diets.

“It starts with a conversation about the horse and finding out something about the horse,” said Bob Coleman, PhD, Associate Professor and Equine Extension Specialist at the University of Kentucky. “Instead of guessing, knowing what the horse is eating and what the horse does can guide where to start nutritionally.”

Horse owners might not always be ready for a discussion about changing diets, or they might not know where to start. Lawrence and Coleman offer tips for talking to owners of horses that are easy keepers or have metabolic issues.

## Body Condition Evaluation

Having an easy keeper isn't always a bad thing. Depending on the horse owner's situation, an easy keeper can be desirable. Generally, they take less feed or can consume less calorie-dense—often less expensive—feeds, according to Lawrence.

“From an economical standpoint, that is an advantage,” she said. “They may also do better in conditions where resources are scarce. Many easy keeping breeds/types prospered in places with harsh climates or under range condi-

tions where ‘hard keepers’ might not fare well.”

Starting the conversation about nutrition starts with learning about the individual horse, Coleman emphasized. To start the dialogue, he recommended asking the client about the horse. How old is it? What is the horse's activity level? What is the feeding routine like?

“If we have a pasture ornament that doesn't do anything and is an easy keeper, we can use National Research Council nutritional requirements guidelines,” he said.

Coleman said the next step is talking to clients about the importance of getting their hands on their horses. Teaching horse owners to use, and follow, the Henneke Body Condition Scoring system allows them to monitor their horses' condition.

“Encourage them to do this on a monthly basis and to write it down. If they have more than one horse, chances are they won't remember correctly. If they take notes, they can look back and see if a horse was soft over the tail head or if they could feel its ribs,” he said.

The University of Minnesota developed a “Healthy Horse App” for iPhones and iPads to allow owners and professionals to estimate the body weight of

their horses. Coleman contributed input at the development phase, and he says it is one tool veterinarians can encourage clients to use when tracking a horse's health.

## Get Specific

The cliché “the devil is in the details” is applicable for developing a nutritional plan for easy keepers or horses with metabolic issues. When you ask your clients for details about rations, get specific.

“People tell me that two horses eat a bale a day,” Coleman said. “A square bale can weigh anywhere from 40 to 60 pounds, so that's not terribly helpful. And how do we know how much they are eating if it's a round bale?”

Feed rations are also often measured in vague terms—the scoop. Does the scoop equal a half-cup or is it five pounds? Many times owners are fortunate enough to not have had problems with previous horses, which makes it challenging to convince them to change their programs. Implementing a new process and taking time to weigh out feed and hay rather than eyeballing the ration can seem like a hassle.

“The conversation needs to be mostly about what the client is doing and why he or she is doing that,” he said. “A lot of owners become very complacent in what they do.”

Once a client is convinced to change, it might not be as easy to get the horse on board. Lawrence said some horses will go on strike, refusing to eat a blend of hay cubes and balancer rather than a concentrate.

“Wait them out,” she said. “It will take about five days, then most capitulate.”

## Keeping Up with Changes

Some horse owners are diligent about following recommendations. When their veterinarians, farriers or local extension agents suggest a protocol, these horse owners embrace the advice.

In recent years, a lot of discussions have focused on pasture management for maintaining a “dense” grass crop.

“This advice is fine for cattle and sheep that are heading to market, and for broodmares and foals with high nutrient needs, but it is not great advice for horse owners with easy keeping horses,” Lawrence said. “The plant material in well-managed pastures in central Kentucky has a nutrient value similar to high-quality alfalfa hay.”

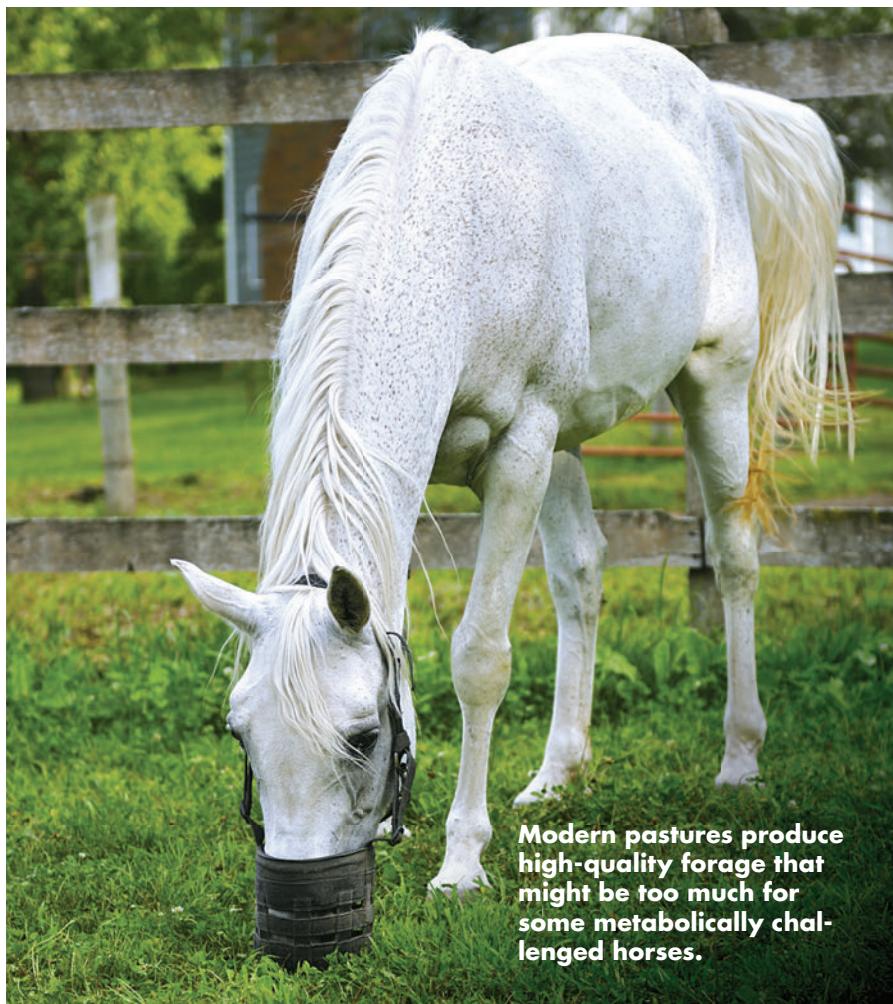
Looking at the client’s pasture or asking about the owner’s pasture management plan provides further insight into how best to manage that person’s easy keepers and horses with metabolic issues.

“Part of our problem is that we have done a good job with hay producers producing good hay, and by giving excellent advice on how to create good pasture, now we have horses on pasture that is better and more readily available than what they need,” Coleman said. “In the wild, horses travel a long way to get what they need. Our horses don’t walk very far before putting their heads down to eat.”

Neither Coleman nor Lawrence are suggesting substituting good-quality forage for dusty, moldy rations, but they emphasize the importance of understanding the nutritional content in what is being fed. This is especially important for those who have horses with metabolic issues, as the sugars and starches in grass can trigger a flare-up.

“In the last 10 years or so, our understanding of the different types of equine metabolic disturbances has increased, as have the criteria that are used to classify horses with these issues,” Lawrence said. “Veterinarians need to be familiar with the criteria for horses with mild insulin dysregulation, horses with equine metabolic syndrome or horses with PPID.”

There are also horses with glycogen storage defects, which could be included in metabolic issues.



**Modern pastures produce high-quality forage that might be too much for some metabolically challenged horses.**

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The criteria for characterizing these issues are evolving with research and with better testing methods.

Equine metabolic issues—especially fat ponies—keep Coleman up at night worrying about laminitis. While some breeds might be more prone to metabolic issues and founder, he stressed the importance of treating every horse as an individual—even if horses are related.

“I had full brothers; one was an easy keeper and he blew his feet off in the pasture,” he said. “It was devastating.”

### **Getting Horse Owners Involved**

Keeping horses healthy is a partnership between you and the horse owner. Getting the client involved in the horse’s nutrition regardless of whether that person has an easy keeper or a horse with metabolic issues creates opportuni-

ties for quicker responses when a horse’s condition changes.

Vets can recommend customers investigate resources such as extensionhorses.org, an online resource that includes research-driven, university-based, unbiased information on a wide range of topics, including nutrition.

### **Take-Home Message**

Spring and fall visits for equine vaccinations and other routine work are a good time to begin a conversation with owners about the importance of nutrition and a horse’s overall body condition. Caring for a horse is a partnership, Coleman emphasized. Starting a dialogue is the first step in creating a relationship that leads to a team approach in establishing a horse’s proper nutritional plan. **EM**