

# **Weight loss in horses**

Beadle Lake Large Animal Clinic

By: Dr. Amy Heinze

Weight loss is common in older horses but a horse of any age can struggle with holding an ideal body weight. In younger horses, weight loss is most likely due to parasites or quality of nutrition. Weight loss in older horses can be due to some or all of the following: poor dental health, decreased digestive efficiency, a weakened immune system, or disease, such as Cushing's and insulin resistance. All of these negatively affect the old horse's ability to utilize the nutrients in the feeds that we provide.

## **If your horse is losing weight consider the following contributing factors:**

Parasitism  
Dental abnormalities  
Nutrition  
Disease  
Stressful environment

### **Parasitism**

Parasites can be a problem at any age and fecal exams should be performed at least yearly to monitor parasite load. When a horse is losing weight or there is a change in pasture or pasture mates, a fecal exam is especially important. Some pastures and horses carry high parasite loads that can infect the herd. In older horses, parasite load may be high due to decreased immune function or underlying disease that weakens the horse's ability to fight off parasites. If there is an underlying disease this can worsen the problem. A proper deworming protocol is always recommended.

### **Dental abnormalities**

Horses that drop feed, have bad breath or refuse to eat hay may have dental problems. Common dental conditions include high teeth, ramps, hooks and waves that may be painful and may not allow them to chew effectively. This can lead to decreased digestibility of the feeds they are eating. Older horses can have problems with worn out teeth or loose teeth. If they have not had routine dental maintenance in their earlier years dental problems can be significant for the older horse.

### **Nutrition**

Quantity and quality of forage and concentrates should be evaluated to make sure the horse is receiving adequate nutrition for their work level. Older horses may have a decreased ability to digest and utilize protein and fiber. They may need an easily digestible forage source or perhaps just more of their current hay. Horses with severe dental problems may not be able to chew long stemmed hay and may need a highly digestible forage such as hay chaff, chopped hay or soaked hay cubes. Forage should comprise at least 50% of the total diet, if not more.

### **Diseases**

Health conditions like Cushing's (pituitary tumor) and kidney and liver insufficiency can lead to weight loss and inability to process nutrients. Routine blood panels help rule disease out when considering weight loss.

### **Environment**

Horses that are submissive or low on the pecking order may be pushed away from feed sources or water. Horses that eat slow may not be getting their full allotment. Make sure the environment is ideal for every horse and make adjustments if needed.

\*\*The Body Condition Scoring system is an important tool in monitoring body weight. It can help you decide if your horse needs more or less feed. Use the guidelines to score your horse on a routine basis. Usually a score of 5 or 6 is ideal. If a feed adjustment is needed, wait at least 60 days before deciding to adjust the diet again.