

# Down on the Farm



## Strategies For Skinny Horses

*Protruding ribs don't mean your horse is fit ... they mean he's undernourished. Here's what you need to know to help your racehorses maintain a healthy weight.*

by **KAREN BRIGGS**

Do you have a bone-rack in your barn?

A skinny horse gives an immediate impression of ill health. . .and it's no illusion. A too-thin equine is one who has no energy reserves to draw on, and when push comes to shove, will not be able to perform to the best of his ability. At the very least, he'll be easily fatigued—at worst, his every system is compromised, making him vulnerable to injury and disease.

A lot of things can create a skinny horse—previous or ongoing injury or illness, poor dental health, parasite infestation, the serious physical demands of lactation (nursing a foal) or breeding (for stallions), excessive work, or the stress of a new environment or lifestyle change. Sometimes physical problems, such as chronic laminitis or heaves, may compromise a horse's mobility and make it difficult

for him to consume enough feed. For geriatric horses, the combination of poor teeth, decreased digestive efficiency and a depressed appetite, may also make it difficult to maintain a healthy weight.

Then again, there's just plain underfeeding—often on the mistaken impression that a horse has to be 'lean and mean' in order to race well. Though excess poundage can definitely be a handicap to a racehorse, the opposite extreme is just as detrimental. But many trainers struggle to keep the correct weight on their charges, because young Thoroughbreds, by their very nature, are sensitive, nervous and easily put off their feed (especially those 2-year-old fillies!).

The fast and efficient metabolisms of many Thoroughbreds can make it an uphill battle to achieve a plump outline. But it is possible to help even a 'genetically' skinny horse maintain a healthy weight—and a few simple

nutritional strategies (coupled with comprehensive veterinary care) can also help restore some needed flesh to a horse who has lost too much.

### **What is a Healthy Weight?**

Even Thoroughbreds come in many shapes and sizes. . .from extremely 'racy' to practically Quarter-Horse-esque. . .so it can be difficult to make generalities as to exactly how much weight is enough. The old horseman's rule that you should be able to feel the ribs, with a firm press of the hands on the barrel, but not see them protruding through the coat, is still a good surface assessment though, of course, it doesn't tell the entire story. Look, too, at his neck, the top of his rump and his spine. . .all should have enough padding that no bones protrude. If your horse strikes you as being underweight, you'll need to institute a program to remedy that.

Step one in achieving that goal is to assess his physical health from top

to bottom. He'll never be able to devote any effort to storing food energy if he is battling an infection, is worn down by chronic pain from an injury, or if parasites are robbing him of the nutritional value of his feed. Nor will he be able to extract any goodness from his diet if his teeth make chewing too painful. Any number of dental conditions, from caps (lingering 'baby' teeth that sit atop erupting adult molars and make chewing difficult) to abscesses (usually from food particles or foreign objects, such as wood splinters, which get lodged in the gums) to sharp dental 'hooks' which develop when regular floating is neglected, can make correct grinding of his feed practically impossible.

For a horse with a chronic condition, such as arthritis, anorexia (loss of appetite) may come with the territory. Controlling the symptoms of the condition with medication—within the limits of what's legal, if your horse is racing—will make him more comfortable and thus more interested in his food (Unfortunately, for horses who need daily assistance from a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory such as butazone, the drug which helps relieve his discomfort may eventually result in gastric ulcers which make it difficult to maintain a healthy weight). Bear in mind that loss of appetite can also be a first hint of disease. For example, it may signal that an EIA-positive horse is suffering an active bout of the infection and is running a fever.

When you notice a horse has lost condition, get your veterinarian to perform a thorough physical.

And, take a moment to assess your management program, particularly if the horse is the hot or nervous type. Are his surroundings, or his care, exacerbating stress and making it impossible for him to relax and put on weight? For example, is he stabled next to an aggressive horse who makes him perpetually nervous? Is he being shipped all over the countryside? Is he not handling the pressure of his training program? Perhaps a change of scenery or routine—even just moving him to a stall in a quieter part of the barn, altering

the time of day you work him, or arranging for a few hours of turn-out—would make a difference in his NQ (Neurosis Quotient).

#### **Feeding for Weight Gain**

In order for your horse to gain weight, he must take in more calories than he burns but, as always, you must be careful not to deliver a diet so energy-dense that his system overloads and triggers colic or founder.

Grains, such as oats, corn and barley, are calorie-rich and it's tempting to just to alter the diet of a thin horse to include large quantities of these carbohydrate-loaded feeds, in the hopes of quickly covering those protruding ribs. But the equine digestive system handles a carbohydrate-dense diet poorly—because horses are designed to eat and digest forage, first and foremost. So, forage is where we'll begin.

If your pasture is either grazed to the ground, predominantly weeds, or stunted and brown thanks to drought, it won't provide sufficient nutrition to your horses on its own, and you'll need to supplement their forage. Good quality—but not necessarily high-protein—hay is the best addition to his diet that you can provide. When the aim is to help your horses gain weight, you can provide forage free-choice.

If you feed your horses outside, keep in mind that pecking order in the herd has an impact on how much your skinny horse gets to eat. If he is not one of the 'alpha' horses, it's possible that his more dominant herdmates are stealing much of his breakfast and dinner. In this case, your best bet is to separate your weight-gain candidate from the herd at feeding time. Either put him in a stall, or in a separate paddock, so that he can focus his undivided attention on his meal.

It's possible that you are faced with a horse who, despite his protruding ribs, is a picky eater, nibbling half-heartedly at his meals and leaving half of it untouched. To discover what suits such a fussy palate, experiment by trying different feed formats—from sweet feed to pellets to extruded 'kibble' to top dressings such as molasses, corn syrup or even raspberry jam—to

see what tempts his appetite. You may also wish to try moistening his grain with warm water to see if that suits him better.

With a fussy eater, freshness is imperative. Feed in small quantities, and remove any feed which isn't consumed within an hour or so before offering more (You can often offer the leftovers to an enthusiastic eater elsewhere in your barn). Scrub out the feed tub on a daily basis. Try offering his hay in a haynet rather than on the floor of his stall. And, of course, make sure that he has a constant supply of fresh, clean water available. Even a horse with a good appetite will decrease his feed intake if his access to fresh water is restricted.

The traditional bran mash also gets a big thumbs-up from most horses, particularly when delivered warm and steaming with a dollop of molasses. To tempt the appetite, there's probably nothing tastier. But, because of its extremely inverted calcium/phosphorus ratio, bran should never be fed on a daily basis. A single mash can, however, jump-start the appetite of a horse convalescing from injury or illness, a stressed traveler, or a tired mare who has just given birth.

#### **Packing in the Calories**

Even a horse with an enthusiastic appetite is limited in his feed intake by the relatively small size of his stomach and the evolutionary inefficiencies of his digestive system. So it's worth finding feeds which deliver good caloric value per pound when you're trying to put weight on a skinny horse.

One favorite feed additive is sugar beet pulp, an excellent source of highly digestible fiber, low in protein (averaging about eight percent) and, to most horses, highly palatable once soaked in water for a few hours. For horses who pick at their hay, beet pulp is an excellent choice—it supplements the fiber content of the diet and, because it's fed in the grain bucket rather than on the floor of the stall, it's far less likely to be trampled into the bedding. Stir it in with the normal grain ration and your

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horse gets increased digestibility of the whole mix. And, unlike grain, it's safe to work up to feeding relatively large quantities of the stuff—its starch content is very low and its negligible vitamin and mineral content mean that it won't upset the nutrient balance of your overall ration.

Another option for fiber is chopped hay (either done on-farm with a heavy-duty leaf shredder or purchased in a bagged format) or hay cubes, soaked in warm water for a few hours to make a mush. For old horses whose lifespans have outreached their teeth, a pelleted grain ration, soaked in water to the consistency of gruel, is also worth a try.

One feed additive which delivers excellent caloric value for the money is fat. Readily digested by the horse, fat (usually in the form of corn or soy oil) delivers almost two and a half times as much energy as the same quantity of carbohydrates. Despite it not being a 'natural' part of a horse's diet, studies have demonstrated that horses have

excellent tolerance for dietary fat, making up as much as 15 to 20 percent of the total ration. And fat is a 'safer' energy supply than carbohydrates as well, since it doesn't tend to ferment in the gut and overload the digestive system as large quantities of grain do.

There are a number of ways to add fat to the diet, ranging from a simple top-dressing of vegetable oil (gradually working up to about a cup and a half per day in total) to high-fat supplements such as rice bran or even sunflower seeds (which most horses relish). Several feed companies now manufacture added-fat rations for performance and breeding horses and, if your horse is a fussy palate, these may be the best choice as the fat is 'camouflaged' within the mix and that harder to taste.

A final suggestion—consider adding a digestive-enhancing supplement to your skinny horse's diet. Brewer's yeast is an inexpensive and readily available supplement which provides a natural source of B-complex vitamins, and also seems to encourage the proliferation and activity of the beneficial

microflora inhabiting the equine digestive tract—the result is often an improved utilization of the nutrients the horse's diet provides. There are also 'acidophilus' supplements, such as Purina's Ration Plus, which promote friendly micro-organisms to the gut—either of these may be a good choice for a skinny horse. Some people have also reported improved feed utilization when feeding a daily deworming supplement such as Strongid—this is a side-effect which has not been documented directly by research, but is probably a result of a reduced parasite load.

Faced with a skinny horse, you'll probably want to try several, if not all, of these approaches to his diet to effect a change. Keep in mind, however, that at first visible change may be slow in coming. As one sage horseman once observed, "You've got to fill up the inside first, before you see a difference on the outside." But some perseverance, coupled with lifestyle changes to minimize stress, will eventually yield results.

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