FEEDING PROGRAMS TO MAINTAIN APPROPRIATE BODY CONDITION OF HORSES

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Body condition of horses is a subjective assessment of the amount of fat deposition on the exterior of the animal. Body condition impacts on the animal s appearance, health and reproductive soundness. Although the appearance may have importance only to those showing or selling horses, the visual qualities of the animal may also broadcast the owner s concern with the well-being of the animal. Condition can also impact the health of the animal or tell us whether the animal is being adequately cared for. A thin horse suggests that the animal may not be consuming adequate nutrients, is ill or is heavily parasitized. An obese horse may be prone to laminitis or other feet and leg problems. Inadequate body condition has also been related to poor reproductive performance in broodmares, increasing the number of cycles required for conception and reducing the pregnancy rate.

There is considerable variation in the digestive and metabolic efficiency of horses. Some are easy keepers and others are hard keepers . Routine assessments of body condition allow the owner to monitor changes in nutritional status of each individual animal. A body condition scoring system (2 - 9, with 5 as desired), readily learned and taught to others, may be used to track gains or losses in body fat stores. Subsequently, feeding recommendations may be adjusted to fit the needs of each animal.

Feeding Programs

For most pleasure horses, broodmares and stallions Condition Scores of 5 or 6 should be the goal of the horse owner. For performance horses, Condition Scores of 4 or 5 are generally more appropriate. For animals that are below the desired condition, additional energy intake is appropriate and may be achieved by feeding more forage and/or more concentrate. When concentrate intakes approach the animal s capacity, a shift to a high fat concentrate may be necessary. For animals that are above the desired condition a reduction in energy intake or an increase in activity will help bring the animal to the desired condition.

Table 1. Daily Feeding programs for pleasure horses

	Forage lb/100 lb BW	Concentrate lb/100 lb BW	Total lb/100 lb BW
Maintenance	1.5 to 2.0	0 to 0.5	1.5 to 2.0
Light work	1.0 to 2.0	0.5 to 1.0	1.5 to 2.5
Moderate work	1.0 to 2.0	0.75 to 1.5	1.75 to 2.5
Intense work	0.75 to 1.5	1.0 to 2.0	2.0 to 2.5

Table 2. Daily feeding programs for mares and growing horses

	Forage lb/100 lb BW	Concentrate lb/100 lb BW	Total lb/100 lb BW
Mares, late gestation	1.0 to 1.5	0.5 to 1.0	1.5 to 2.0
Mares, early lactation	1.0 to 2.0	1.0 to 2.0	2.0 to 3.0
Mares, late lactation	1.0 to 2.0	0.5 to 1.5	2.0 to 2.5
Nursing foal	0	1.0 to 2.0	2.5 to 3.5
Weanling foal	0.5 to 1.0	1.5 to 3.0	2.0 to 3.5
Yearling foal	1.0 to 1.5	1.0 to 2.0	2.0 to 3.0
Long yearling	1.0 to 1.5	1.0 to 1.5	2.0 to 2.5
Two-year-old	1.0 to 1.5	1.0 to 1.5	2.0 to 2.5

Adjusting the feeding program for Condition Score

For animals that are not at the desired condition, an adjustment in the feeding program can bring most animals to the desired condition within a few months. For Florida conditions, we usually recommend the middle of the above ranges (**Tables 1 &2**) for most horses. Those recommendations are modified according to **Table 3** to adjust for body condition. Therefore, if the table shows that the animal should be getting 10 lb of concentrate daily and the animal has a 3 Condition Score, the intake should be increased by 20% or 2 lb to a total of 12 lb.

Table 3. Modification of the concentrate feeding levels for animals of different body conditions.

Condition Score	Condition Name	Concentrate Adjustment %
2	Emaciated*	+ 40
3	Very thin	+ 40
4	Thin	+ 20
5	Desired	0
6	Fat	- 20
7	Very fat	- 40
8	Obese	- 60

*Emaciated horses must be brought up to desired intake levels quite slowly to avoid digestive and metabolic problems.

Maintaining appropriate body condition on horses can have a major impact on the animal s appearance, well being, and reproductive efficiency. There can also be an economic advantage, since over feeding horses increases your feed costs and probably the veterinary bills.