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### **The Thin Horse- How to put weight on!**

by Reggie Tschorn DVM (original owner of Arlington Equine, first published in *Creature's Corner News*)

**What is the best way to put weight on a “poor” horse? I took in a very skinny rescue horse that needs some pounds before winter comes. He is about 10 years old. Also, wondering if what you suggest would work for older horses?**

Poor body condition in a neglected horse is usually the result of the combination of undernourishment, inadequate de-worming, poor dentistry and/or an underlying medical condition. All four issues may need to be addressed to get the horse to a better weight.

The first question I need to ask is ‘why is the horse in this condition?’ If this is one skinny horse in a herd of well-fed and reasonably healthy animals, that throws up some red flags to me as to whether there might be a medical condition associated with the poor condition. There are certain metabolic diseases and kidney problems that would indicate the need for a very specific diet i.e. low carbs or low protein, so I would consider whether some screening tests were in order to give you a base line assessment of what you are dealing with.

A fecal exam can tell you both what types of worms your horse may have, and also the load or infestation. Certain wormers are more appropriate for specific situations. Purging a wormy horse with a high-powered wormer can cause colic. In these cases, sometimes a milder wormer is used at higher doses, or for several days in a row.

A dental exam is appropriate to see what condition the teeth are in, and also to help make an accurate age assessment. An infected tooth can make it nearly impossible for a horse to eat, and sharp points or dental arcade problems can be a huge factor in weight issues. Some of the key ‘problem teeth’ can be way in the back of the horse’s mouth and are not easy to feel or see without the use of a dental speculum.

As far as diet goes, the best way to put weight on a horse is slowly! It can take months to get a horse up to healthy weight. Increase feed quantities slowly, and make sure to provide unlimited amounts of clean, fresh water. Many poor weight situations are exaggerated by lack of water. You may be amazed at how quickly an emaciated animal will improve when it is well hydrated. If there are no contradictory medical conditions, start the horse on a diet of around 12% protein and 12% fat. Corn oil can be supplemented, building up to ½ a cup 2x a day. The addition of probiotics and yeast cultures can help increase the digestibility of the diet. A vitamin supplement can also be added. Try to find good quality hay and feed it free choice. Horses with tooth issues often prefer softer second cutting hay, and may also need soaked hay cubes, or wet beet pulp.

Reasonable exercise is a good thing, but remember, hard work can use up needed calories. Turn out and hand walking may be the best for the horse.

There is probably not a lot of difference in handling the under-weight older horse, however the likelihood of medical conditions and dental issues does increase with age, so it may be more important to consider blood work and teeth as part of your initial evaluation.

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