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Body Condition and Laminitis

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Fat horses are unhealthy horses. Fat horses can't tolerate exercise as well as horses in good condition. Fat acts like a layer of insulation around the horse. Being so well insulated, the fat horse can't get rid of the body heat that's generated during exercise; that means that a fat horse can overheat and fail to perform well (or stop performing altogether). Chronic obesity is definitely associated with laminitis, as well as with the occurrence of fat tumors (lipomas) in the abdomen. (Lipomas can twist around the intestine and result in your horse going to the hospital for colic surgery). In addition, heavy body weight puts an increased load on the feet. Furthermore, fat horses tend to be more inactive than horses kept in good condition; inactivity itself is a risk factor for laminitis. Finally, there's the odd problem of obesity-associated laminitis that's discussed in chapter four.

Ideal body condition is pretty simple. You can feel it. You can easily feel the ribs of a horse that's in good body condition, although you won't be able to see them. If your horse has a big crest on its neck, or if you need to get a running start in order to get up enough momentum to feel your horse's ribs, then you need to get some weight off of your horse.

If your horse is too fat, it's generally your fault. After all, horses love to eat and they can only eat what you feed them or allow them to eat. The fact that horses eat for as much as 17 hours in a 24 hour period in the wild is irrelevant because these horses tend to eat low-calorie grasses and walk around all day, as opposed to their overweight cousins who sit in stalls all day eating higher calorie feeds and buckets of horse treats. Horses kept in stalls can't get enough exercise to keep from getting fat if they are also getting fed too much.

If you don't want your horse to get laminitis, don't let it get fat. If it does get fat, reduce the feed, use a feed with lower caloric content (e.g., grass hay instead of alfalfa) or increase its exercise (or all three). And for goodness sakes, be patient. You want weight loss to be gradual and consistent. It does take time for a horse to lose weight and there are even medical conditions that are associated with a rapid and dramatic decrease in calories. Ask your veterinarian for help in coming up with a safe weight loss program for your horse.