

This time of year is my favorite time in the North Country! But as the leaves turn color and the morning dew turns to frost, I am reminded that winter is right around the corner. For this reason, this is the time of year I start to worry about the thin or older horses out there. Older horses, especially those that have begun to lose weight are much more prone to having issues in the winter. Whether it be colic, injury, or simply going down with exhaustion, the harsh North Country winter is tough on compromised horses. Horses that are thin have very little energy to spare, and the colder weather and harsh environmental conditions can push their bodies to their limits. Additionally, ice and slush can increase risk of falls and injuries. We thought it would be a good time to go through some of the reasons a horse can start losing weight, and how we can help. If you have a horse on the thinner side, now is the time to call us so that we can help get to the bottom of what is going on before the harsh winter weather arrives.

It is important to remember that being old is NOT a disease and is therefore not a good reason for a horse to be losing weight. Older horses are certainly more prone to some of the conditions that lead to weight loss, but proper care can help address these conditions and allow even very old horses to do well through the winter. The following are some of the most common reasons a horse may begin to lose weight:

### 1. **Teeth:**

Horses teeth continuously erupt from their gums throughout their life. The chewing of rough forages like hay will grind their teeth down as new tooth erupts. However, their teeth are never worn down evenly, resulting in the formation of sharp points at different locations in the mouth that can be very uncomfortable. This discomfort can manifest in many different ways such as difficulty chewing/eating, behavior changes, or performance decline. When dental pain becomes severe enough to affect their chewing, horses can quickly start to lose weight because chewing is an important part of digestion. For this reason, horses need routine dental care performed by a veterinarian throughout their life. This means having dental exams performed with sedation and a dental speculum at regular intervals. During these exams, your veterinarian will perform what is called a dental "float" where they use a tool to grind down the sharp points that can cause discomfort in the mouth. Additionally, a veterinarian can identify other issues such as broken or infected teeth, gum disease, or uneven wear of the teeth, and work with you to treat these issues accordingly. Ensuring good dental care throughout the life of your horse is one of the most important ways to promote longevity.

*At North Star Veterinary Services, dental exams and floats are performed by Dr. Lila Knowlton-Grallert with a new cordless PowerFloat. This tool allows her to safely and completely float teeth and equilibrate (balance) the dental arcade while being gentle with the surrounding soft tissues. Additionally, Dr. Lila is now equipped to perform most routine tooth extractions in the field.*

*We recommend that all horses have a sedated dental exam performed by a veterinarian every 1-2 years. Horses over the age of 15 should have them yearly. Horses with known dental problems sometimes need these dental exams performed every 6 months especially as they age.*

### 2. **Parasites:**

Like any animal, horses can be affected by internal parasites that live in their gastrointestinal tracts. These parasites can cause damage to their guts, resulting in decreased digestion of food and weight loss. Additionally, high parasite loads can lead to many other problems such as colic and even death. For this reason, excellent deworming programs are essential to equine wellness. Unfortunately, over the years parasites have become very resistant to most of the de-wormers we have available. Some no longer even work on certain population of parasites, so the traditional rotating through de-wormers every few months is no longer recommended. Because the population of parasites on each farm is different, the only way to know whether or not certain de-wormers are working is to perform routine fecal egg counts on each horse on the farm. Additionally, fecal tests can be repeated several weeks after de-worming treatments to see if your treatment worked against those parasites.

Even though performing these fecal egg count tests may seem like an added expense, often they help you decrease the overall cost of your de-worming program because many horses who do not have many parasites will only need de-worming twice a year, decreasing overall cost of de-worming greatly. The only way to know how often a horse needs to be de-wormed is to perform the test.

*Because we feel that regular fecal tests are so important, we are excited to announce that we are working with a new lab to make this test more affordable for you. Before with shipping and lab fees, the cost to you for a fecal test was around \$43/horse. Now, we are offering the following prices on fecal egg count tests:*

- 1 horse: \$35                      2 horses: \$60                      3+ horses: \$25/horse
- Additionally, if a second sample is submitted for the same horse after treatment the price drops \$5/horse across the board for the second submission

*You do not need to schedule a visit for this test as long as we have been out to see your horse within the past year. Simply call and let us know you are interested, and stop by the office with labeled fresh samples in plastic bags. We will call with results and de-worming recommendations within a few days.*

### 3. **Nutrition:**

Very often, horses are thin because they are not getting adequate nutrition. Every horse has different nutritional needs, and even though you may feel as if they are being fed a lot of food, depending on their age, breed, and metabolism they may need a different nutrition program to thrive. Additionally, how they are being fed can lead to decreased feed intake. For example, horses fed with other horses may fall victim to competition resulting in not being able to eat the amount of food you think they are getting. In general, a good equine nutrition program is made up of good quality forages (hay), a commercial concentrate (grain), and a free choice mineral. However, feeding a horse can be complicated.

*If you have questions about how to feed your horse, booking an appointment with your veterinarian is a great place to start. Often, we are able to help tailor your horse's nutrition program, but if the case is more complicated we will help you find an equine nutritionist to work with.*

### 4. **Disease:**

Sometimes, weight loss can be associated with certain diseases. Almost any disease can lead to weight loss, but some of the ones that we diagnose more commonly are gastric (stomach) ulcers, sand impaction, and metabolic disease (like Equine Cushing's Disease).

*Diagnosing these diseases starts with a good physical exam and conversation with your veterinarian. From there, they may recommend further diagnostics such as blood work, and work with you to come up with an appropriate treatment plan.*

Although weight loss in your horse can be stressful and confusing, we are here to help. Often, a good treatment plan will include a variety of changes, but always starts with a conversation with your veterinarian and a good physical exam. Now is the time to get a head start on any of these issues, because as the temperatures drop and the energy demands on your horse increases, it will become increasingly hard to get weight on them and keep them healthy. Please give us a call today to make an appointment if you have any questions or concerns about your horse.