**Is your horse overweight?**

**Stephanie Wood, Senior Equine Technologist, CAFRE**

Equines have a natural cycle of body weight change, losing weight in winter that is regained in the spring and summer. This body weight cycle is often prevented in domestic equines with many owners aiming to maintain their animals at the same weight throughout the year. Problems occur when equines are prevented from losing weight in the winter months but continue to gain weight in the spring and summer. This altered pattern of body weight change has lead to an increased proportion of domestic equines being overweight, with published reports indicating that 21% to 62% of equines in developed countries are overweight. Excess fat stores increase the strain on joints, ligaments and tendons and the demand on the circulatory and respiratory systems, often leading to reduced exercise tolerance and athletic performance. Excess fat stores also impact negatively on equine health with overweight animals more likely to be affected by colic, metabolic conditions and laminitis.

At present there is no information on the body condition of equines in Northern Ireland so CAFRE has undertaken a study to determine the body condition of a sample of horses and ponies within Northern Ireland and also determine the ability of owners to assess their animal’s body condition.

**Method**

The study collected data from 103 equines (48 ponies and 55 horses) situated at three livery yards (Co. Tyrone, Co. Armagh and Co. Down). The amount of body fat at eight points on the horses body (see picture) was assessed first by owners then by a trained assessor using the 0-5 fat score scale (0=emaciated, 3=ideal weight, 5=obese). Scores for each body point were averaged to provide an overall fat score.

To determine if animal height affected fat scores individuals were measured at the highest point of the withers and categorised as either a pony (<148cm) or as a horse (>148cm). Each animal was also categorised according to age (young=1-6 years, adult=7-20 years, old=21-26 years and geriatric=27 years plus) to determine if age affected body condition.

**Results**

Forty-two percent of owner fat scores agreed with those of the trained assessor and a further 31% were within a half score of the assessors score, indicating that most owners were able to correctly identify body fat stores and that the fat score system is simple and effective for owners to use.

When animals were classified according to their fat score as either underweight, ideal weight or overweight, 66% of animals were overweight (Table 1). Ponies tended to be fatter than horses with 73% assessed as overweight compared to only 60% of horses.

Age also affected the body condition of horses and ponies the same, with geriatric animals (27 years plus) being thinner than young and adult animals but no different to those aged 21-26 years. This result indicates that horses and ponies are able to maintain body condition until they reach their late 20’s, later in life than many owners may expect.

**Table 1.** Percentage of horses and ponies assessed as underweight, in ideal weight and as

 overweight

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Fat Score**  | **Category** | **% of Horses** | **% of Ponies** | **% of all Equines** |
| **0 – 2.5**  | Underweight | 2 | 8 | 5 |
| **3** | Ideal Weight | 38 | 19 | 29 |
| **3.5 – 5**  | Overweight | 60  | 73 | 66 |

**Implications**

If the results from the pilot study are representative of the wider Northern Ireland population then a considerable number of horses and ponies are at risk of health issues and compromised performance associated with excess body weight. A contributing factor to this high level of obesity may be the ability of equines to maintain body weight until much later in life than perhaps owners expect. As animals age, owners may provide more food in anticipation of age related weight loss, however improved dental and veterinary care and the development of feeds specifically designed for the ageing equine prevent such looses from occurring until the animals reach geriatric age, contributing to the increased incidence of overweight equines in the general population.

To prevent excesses and inadequate fat stores owners are recommended to assess their horse or ponies fat score on a monthly basis to determine if changes in weight and feeding practices are required.

**Do you want to get involved?**

CAFRE are expanding the Equine Weight Management project to gain information on the wider equine population in Northern Ireland. Project participants will provide information on their horse or ponies fat score and weigh tape measurement on a monthly basis to CAFRE to enable season fluctuations in body weight to be tracked. Participants will also have opportunities to weigh their horse or pony at specific locations twice each year. To be a part of the project or for further information please email stephanie.wood@daera-ni.gov.uk