



Lilydale Clinic
484 Maroondah Highway
Lilydale VIC 3140
P (03) 9739 5244 F (03) 9735 5509

Yarra Glen Clinic
28 Bell Street Yarra Glen VIC 3775
P (03) 9730 1569

www.yarrarangesvet.com.au
clinic@yarrarangesvet.com.au

Weight loss in horses

A common problem that we encounter over winter is loss of body condition, or weight loss. This is more common over the wet, colder months and is especially a problem in older horses and ponies. There are many reasons why horses lose weight. These include:

- Poor nutrition/inadequate diet
- Dental disease
- Internal parasites (worms)
- Internal disease (problems with the heart, gut, liver, kidneys etc.)
- Other problems around the head or neck
- Increased exercise or metabolic requirements without increased feeding

It is sometimes possible to underestimate how much energy (carbohydrates, proteins and fat) horses and ponies need in order to maintain their body weight. In winter it is wet and cold and there is not as much nutrition in the grass because there is a lack of sunlight (sunlight is how plants make energy). Horses also do not graze as much in winter as they may spend more time sheltering from the rain and wind. It is important to make sure that you provide adequate roughage (hay, and chaff) if there is not enough grass to eat. Roughage should make up at least 50% of your horses diet – any less than this means they will not digest their grain properly and run this risk of gut disturbances.

Winter is a great time to make sure that all of your horses health checks are up to date, because they are often not in heavy work or competing. A yearly health check is recommended, including vaccination (tetanus, strangles and hendra virus), dental exam and treatment to reduce any sharp edges or abnormalities before they begin to cause weight loss. As horses eat plant material only, they need to chew food well in order to break down the plant cell walls and access the nutrition inside the plant. If their teeth are sharp, they will not chew properly due to pain and this can cause loss of weight.

Internal parasites or worms are certainly more of a problem over the wetter months. Adult worms live in the intestines and pass eggs in the horses faeces. These eggs hatch into larvae on pasture and horses ingest the larvae when they graze – thus completing the life cycle. In summer worm eggs and larvae do not survive in the hot dry sun, but during wet cooler weather they do and horses ingest a larger volume of worm eggs. It is important to make sure your horse has regular worming over winter.

If your horse is losing weight unexpectedly or rapidly, despite taking care of diet, teeth and worming, ensure that you have a veterinary visit and examination to check for any unusual problems. The vet will check the mouth, head and neck to make sure there are not problems chewing and if need be may need to take a blood test to check for internal disease, or in some cases Equine Cushing's Disease.

Don't forget that if you increase your horses workload you may need to increase the amount you are feeding as well! Increased metabolic requirements for keeping warm in winter may also mean that you need to increase the amount you are feeding as well.

For more information, please call the clinic on (03) 9739 5244