A recent study conducted at The University of Nottingham’s School of Veterinary Medicine and Science in England reported that rates of obesity in horses are likely to be just as high as they are in humans. Using the data collected from questionnaires, researchers estimate that the prevalence of overweight/obesity in pleasure riding horses (horses not in competition) is likely to be 54%. Equine obesity should be a concern for horse owners in the U.S. too, as it is linked to a number of different diseases including arthritis, laminitis and equine metabolic syndrome.

As with weight issues in humans, weight issues in horses are most often a result of two things: consuming too many calories and not burning enough calories. Also, just as many people are emotional eaters, many horse owners are emotional feeders! Oftentimes our reasoning for feeding concentrates (aka grain) is tied more to feel-good emotions than to nutritional science. It makes us feel good to give our loyal companions tasty treats. It warms our hearts when our faithful steeds nicker at us when they hear the grain bag rustle. We misconstrue it as a sign of love when we give our horses feed which they eagerly gobble up because it is so delicious. Unfortunately many horse owners are unknowingly killing (probably hurting is more accurate) their horses with kindness. Data collected in the UK study indicates that only one in ten horses was not fed a concentrate.

Giving the manner in which many horses are housed, lack of exercise for many animals is a chronic issue. A daily routine of confinement in stalls or small turnouts with little access to pasture or regular exercise results in abnormally sedentary lifestyle. Proper nutritional management of horses in these confinement settings is certainly crucial.

Understanding the role of overfeeding and insufficient activity on equine obesity is necessary; however, horse owners also need to know how to evaluate their horse’s condition. Most people do not have access to a scale appropriate for weighing horses. Additionally, estimating a horse’s weight based on visual inspection is a difficult skill to develop. There are weight tapes (often available through your feed dealer) that can be a good way to monitor changes in the horse’s girth circumference. The weight tape has weight estimates in increments along its...
length similar to a sewing tape measure. When a weight tape is wrapped around the heart girth of your horse a weight estimate is provided based on where the beginning of the tape meets back upon itself. It is important to remember that a weight tape only provides an estimate of weight and that weight doesn’t necessary give you an indication of the horse’s body condition (too fat, too thin or just right)

There is a method for evaluating a horse’s condition called a body condition scoring (BCS) system. The BCS system is a more accurate way to assess your horse’s condition than determining their weight. The BCS system evaluates the amount of fat the horse has covering its bones in nine key areas: along the crest of its neck, wither, shoulder, behind the elbow, over the topline, over the tailhead, ribs, point of hips and point of buttock. The scale is from one to nine with one being extremely emaciated and nine being extremely fat. A BCS of five is considered moderate with the neck, withers and shoulders appearing rounded and blending smoothly into the body. Ribs cannot be seen, but are easily felt. The back is level with neither a ridge nor a gully along the topline. Fat around the tailhead is beginning to feel spongy. A BCS of five is where most, if not all, horses should be. More detailed information on the BCS system along with images can be found at http://www.thehorse.com/free-reports/30154/equine-body-condition-score-poster It takes a little bit of practice, but the BCS system is definitely something every horse owner can and should master.

Not only is it better for our horse's overall health for it to be maintained at a proper body condition score, but it is also better for our wallets. Let’s stop being emotional feeders and feed based on the legitimate nutritional needs of our horses so that we can keep all of them in a healthy, moderate body condition.