

THE TRUTH ABOUT HAY BELLIES

Find out what really causes the distinctive, round abdomen in some horses

Ever been told that your horse has a hay belly and needs to lose weight? Well, relax! He's not fat, he just has gas. In fact, gas production is normal and healthy. It indicates that your horse is getting enough hay for hindgut microbial fermentation to occur. A distended abdomen is often referred to as a "hay belly" to describe an overweight horse, even when the rest of his body is normal, but fat does not accumulate extensively on the horse's lower abdomen (belly).

Horses do accumulate fat in specific areas: neck, withers, back, ribs, shoulders, and tailhead. In 1984, Dr. Don Henneke, of Texas A&M University, developed a "body condition scoring system" that categorizes horses' condition based on the amount of fat stored in these six areas. This system is still the mainstay for equine health professionals. Instructions for using the Henneke system are in Dr. Getty's comprehensive book on equine nutrition, *Feed Your Horse Like a Horse*.

Horse owners who deliberately limit hay consumption and replace it with cereal grain to avoid a hay belly are doing their horses a disservice, and increasing the risk of colic and laminitis. Forage should be the foundation of any horse's diet. It is vital for the health of the hindgut microbes, and hence, the health of your horse.

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