

Horses can lose weight for a number of reasons. Some may be unable to eat properly, due, most commonly, to a painful mouth. Others may be unable to utilise or absorb the food eaten due to a disease process or organ dysfunction, which can suppress appetite. Some may simply not be fed adequate food/calories for their dietary needs, or fed poor quality feeds. Groups of ponies may lose weight due to bullying, or competing for feed.

Dental Disorders:

Tooth related problems are probably the most common reason for weight loss in adult horses. Problems can arise in a young horse due to eruption disorders and in older horses due to disruption of normal wearing of teeth. Young horses can have retained 'caps' (remnants of temporary cheek teeth), abnormally positioned teeth or occasionally extra, or even missing, teeth which can affect how a horse eats. Teeth continually erupt throughout life. Ideally the rate of eruption matches the rate of wear. When this isn't the case, either due to husbandry (i.e. lack of time spent eating forage or grazing) or anatomical variation, sharp enamel points can develop, which if left develop into large overgrowths.

Clinical signs relating to dental disorders include slow eating, dropping food, abnormal bit behaviour, halitosis, food pouching and of course weight loss. **Treatment** and prevention includes regular dental check ups every 6-12 months, starting from an early age.

Chronic Liver Failure:

The liver has a large functional capacity, which means we usually only see signs of liver failure when more than two thirds of the liver is not working. Chronic Liver failure (CLF) tends to be a disease of older animals and is classically caused by exposure to certain liver toxic plants, the most well known of which is ragwort.

Clinical signs include on-going weight loss, along with depression, loss of appetite and jaundice. Severely affected horses can have neurological signs such as repeated circling and head pressing.

Diagnosis - would be made by clinical assessment, bloods samples and sometimes a liver biopsy.

There is no **treatment** for CLF, only supportive care. Obviously ensuring your horse does not have access to ragwort is something that you can do to help prevent liver damage.

Heavy Parasite Burdens:

Horses are continually exposed to internal parasites ('worms') all their lives. Infestations with cyathostome and *Strongylus* species are probably the most common and most serious, but high burdens of any internal parasite can cause ill thrift and weight loss.

Control is by pasture management and strategic use of anthelmintics ('wormers'). We currently use a protocol of 'Equest' every 3 months and 'Equest Pramox' in Autumn for tapeworms

Chronic Kidney Failure:

This is again a disease of older animals seen as their kidneys begin to fail. Kidney failure can occasionally be seen in young horses if they have been born with abnormal kidneys.

Clinical signs - include weight loss, inappetance, depression, increased urination and drinking.

Diagnosis - is based on blood sample and urine analysis.

Treatment - as with liver failure is supportive.

Chronic Diarrhoea:

Diarrhoea is a symptom not a disease and can be caused by a number of reasons. In relation to weight loss diarrhoea can be a symptom of parasitism and liver disease as previously mentioned. It can also be due to inflammatory bowel disease, small intestinal malabsorption (where the gut can not absorb certain nutrients), intestinal neoplasia ('cancer'), and peritonitis, all of which can be a cause of sometimes severe weight loss in adult horses.