

OBESITY IN HORSES COULD BE AS HIGH AS IN HUMANS

At least one in five horses used for leisure are overweight or obese. It's a condition which can lead to laminitis and equine metabolic syndrome.

The pilot study, carried out by The University of Nottingham's School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, showed that rates of obesity among horses are likely to be just as high as they are among people. The results are published online on Monday 17 January 2011 in the journal *Veterinary Record*.

The study, by third year veterinary student Helen Stephenson from Lydney in Gloucestershire, assessed the prevalence of obesity among horses whose owners were registered with Oakham Veterinary Hospital — one of the school's clinical associates specialising in the treatment of horses.

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Research carried out in Scotland has already shown a prevalence of obesity in pleasure riding horses but this is the first time a similar study has been done in England.

Five hundred owners were sent questionnaires. None of them kept horses for breeding, livery, riding stables, or competition, so were all classed as keeping their animals for leisure only.

Of the 160 returned one in five showed that their horses were either overweight or obese.

The research was supervised by Dr Sarah Freeman, a specialist in Veterinary Surgery at the vet school. Dr Freeman said: "This provides the first snapshot of the prevalence of obesity in horses in the UK and an insight into owners' management of bodyweight in horses. Obesity is linked to a number of different diseases, including arthritis, laminitis and equine metabolic syndrome. A larger study would be useful to establish the prevalence and risk factors for equine obesity in different horse populations across the UK."

The owners were asked about their perceptions of their horses' body condition, and asked to score this from zero to five, with a score of more than 3 indicating overweight.

Grass was the main source of forage for half the horses and coarse mix was the main source of concentrate feed in a similar proportion. Only one in 10 horses was not fed any concentrate.

The researchers then assessed the body condition of 15 randomly selected horses to see if the scores had under or overestimated the horse's weight.

They assigned an average score that was significantly higher for these horses; eight of the owners had scored their horse at least one grade lower than the researcher had, indicating that the owners had underestimated their horses' weight.

On the basis of the researchers' findings, the authors estimate that the true prevalence of overweight/obesity was likely to be 54% rather than the 20% indicated by the questionnaire responses.

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Notes to editors:

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