

Is It Equine Metabolic Syndrome or Cushing's Disease?

Equine metabolic syndrome (EMS):

Laminitis is often the first indicator of the syndrome.

- EMS has become more prevalent in the equine community.
- It's often found in middle-aged horses (ages 8 to 18).
- Not all obese horses have EMS, and not all EMS horses are obese.
- Some EMS horses go on to develop PPID, but not all.

Dietary recommendations for overweight horses with EMS or PPID

- Calorie intake should be adjusted to encourage weight loss and then maintenance of a healthy weight.
- Limit sugar and starch (nonstructural carbohydrates) intake.
- Restrict access to pasture grass.



Symptoms of both EMS and PPID

Obesity with abnormal fat deposits in the neck, tail head, and supra-orbit (pouch above the eye)

Laminitis, both acute and chronic

Insulin resistance (aka insulin dysregulation)

Additional symptoms of pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (PPID) aka Cushing's disease

Abnormal sweating

Delayed shedding

Hypertrichosis (long, curly hair)

Increased drinking and urination

Infertility

Lethargy

Neurological deficits, including blindness

Recurrent infections

Skeletal muscle atrophy

Pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (PPID) aka Cushing's disease:

Muscle loss, lethargy, infertility, and secondary infections are first indicators of the syndrome.

- PPID is found in older horses.
- PPID horses can also develop signs of EMS, but not all do.

Dietary recommendations for hard keepers and performance horses with PPID

- Maintaining a healthy weight is critical.
- Calories should be derived from high fat and fiber concentrates.
- Limit sugar and starch intake. Feed alfalfa with caution, as excess protein can cause issues in some metabolically challenged horses.
- Monitor weight closely and adjust calories accordingly.



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