Fit & Sound: A Gentle Exercise Plan for the Overweight Horse

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Shelly's journey began at the age of five with her first pony, Ginger, a firecracker who sparked a lifelong love for horses. After working with a retired racehorse, Tasslehoff, Shelly became passionate about understanding equine and human sports therapy. For the past 21 years, Shelly has been helping both horses and humans move and perform at their best, using her expertise to support a wide range of horses — from elite competitors to happy hacks.

Helping an overweight horse shed those extra pounds is so important for their health, soundness, and long-term wellbeing. A thoughtful, low-impact exercise plan can make a real difference, supporting steady weight loss without putting unnecessary strain on your horse’s joints or muscles.

Here’s a beginner-friendly exercise programme to help your horse ease into a more active lifestyle. If unsure, always consult your vet before starting any new fitness routine and, if you haven’t already, check with a nutrition specialist that your horse is receiving a diet suitable for their lifestyle. And don’t forget to join the SPILLERS Slimmers’ Club for a wealth of resources and advice to support your horse’s weight loss journey!

Weeks 1–2: Getting Moving

Goal: Establish a routine and help your horse become comfortable with consistent movement.

- **Activity:** Walk in-hand or under saddle for 15–20 minutes
- **Pace**: A relaxed, steady walk
- **Surface:** Flat, even ground
- **Breaks:** Take regular pauses, particularly if your horse is out of breath or sluggish

Pro Tip: Why not add a bit of light grooming or a few carrot stretches before or after your walk? Not only does this help loosen up muscles, but it’s also a lovely way to bond with your horse.

SPILLERS Tip: Despite the bad press they sometimes receive, fresh carrots contain around 85% water which means each carrot contains little in the way of calories or sugar – just don’t feed too many each day.

SPILLERS Management Tip: One of the most effective ways to track your horse’s progress is through regular weigh taping. This simple practice will help you monitor subtle weight changes, ensuring your horse’s condition is improving steadily.

Weeks 3–4: Gently Increasing Endurance

Goal: Begin improving your horse’s cardiovascular fitness and stamina.

- **Walking time:** Increase to 30 minutes
- **Terrain:** If possible, introduce gentle slopes
- **Add-ons:** Try simple groundwork, like walking over ground poles to encourage core engagement and improve coordination

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SPILLERS Management Tip: If you're trying to help your horse lose weight it's essential they're on a calorie restricted diet. Grass and forage should provide the majority of calories in a horse's diet but many good doers don't need the level of calories these often provide. Look into ways you can safely and effectively reduce their grazing time or forage intake.

Weeks 5–6: Mix It Up

Goal: Engage more muscle groups and start building strength.

- **Schedule:** 4–5 days per week
- **Activity:** 30–40 minutes walking, with short bursts of trotting (begin with 30 seconds to 1 minute, gradually increasing to 5 minutes in total per session)

"Variety is great for keeping your horse mentally engaged, and it'll also help ensure they're progressing physically" says Shelley.

SPILLERS Tip: Adding a balancer such as SPILLERS Lite & Lean Balancer can help ensure your horse receives the essential nutrients they need without the excess calories. This balancer is specifically formulated for horses on calorie restricted diets, as it supports the metabolic system, muscle function and overall health.

Week 7 and Beyond: Building Lasting Fitness

Goal: Achieve gradual, sustainable progress.

- **Trot work:** Slowly increase this as your horse becomes fitter
- **Introduce:** Low-impact lunging on large circles (1–2 times per week)
- **Avoid:** Cantering, tight circles, or any fast-paced work until your horse's muscles and joints are ready for it

Shelley adds; "*Remember, each horse progresses at their own pace. If you need to repeat weeks or slow things down, don't worry — that's all part of the process."*

SPILLERS Management Tip: If your horse is sweating regularly don't forget to add salt to their diet to reduce the risk of dehydration. For many leisure horses, simply adding a tablespoon of salt to the bucket feed is sufficient but if unsure contact the SPILLERS Care-Line.

With patience, consistency, and a bit of time, your horse will become healthier, happier, and more active. Remember, the journey to fitness is a partnership between you and your horse, and every step you take together counts.

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