Obesity in ponies and horses linked to misbehavior

A study from Australia suggests proper diet and exercise could help improve equine behavior.

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The problems of equine obesity are well documented. From increased risk of equine metabolic syndrome to excessive wear and tear on aging joints, veterinarians agree that keeping horses’ weight in check is good for their health. But could obesity also be related to bad behavior?

A study by Petra Buckley, Senior Lecturer in Equine Science at Charles Sturt University in New South Wales, Australia, suggests that there may in fact be a link between weight and behavior in equines.

The subjects of the study were 84 Pony Club mounts from seven different Australian clubs. The equines were tracked by their owners for a year. The owners kept records on nutrition, healthcare, exercise and behavior. The owners recorded any incidents of misbehavior, which was classified as dangerous or unwelcome. Dangerous behaviors included bucking, biting, bolting or kicking while unwelcome behaviors were less aggressive acts of disobedience, such as being difficult to catch, misbehaving in the trailer or “pulling like a steam train.” Each month, the horses were examined by a veterinarian to note if there was any pain or lameness that could be contributing to the misbehavior.

At the end of the year of data collection, 59% of horses had at least one incidence of misbehavior. The likelihood of misbehavior was found to be higher in equines that were fat or obese. Those that were excessively fat were approximately three times more likely to misbehave than their more svelte counterparts. Horses that were ridden less frequently were also more prone to bad behavior, as were those fed supplemental feed or with regular access to “good grass.”

The study suggests that monitoring a horse’s diet, ensuring he is not overfed, and riding or otherwise exercising him at least three days each week could help reduce the incident of naughty behavior.

Misbehaviour in Pony Club horses: Incidences and risk factors; P Buckley, JM Morton, DJ Buckley, GT Coleman; Equine Veterinary Journal, March 2012