

I am riding my Thoroughbred gelding again after a four-month break. As he loses his winter coat, it is apparent that he is thinner than I imagined. I like to maintain him in moderate weight, but he's a step below that. His spine and hip bones protrude more than I like, his neck is thin, and he has a tucked-up look to his abdomen. What is a realistic timeline for weight gain?

Performance horses generally train and compete at a body condition between 4 and 6 based on a scale of 1 (emaciated) to 9 (obese). A score of 5 is considered moderate and is appropriate for most working horses.

From the description you've provided, I will assume your gelding is a condition score of 4. Moving your gelding to a condition score of 5 might take two to four months.

Researchers have suggested that a weight gain of 35-45 lb will increase the body condition score of an 1,100-lb horse one increment, in this case from 4 to 5. While it will be nearly impossible (and not recommended) to accomplish this amount of weight gain in one month, it can be achieved in two to three months.

From a practical standpoint, start off by reassessing the forage you're feeding. By improving the quality of the hay, you will be adding calories to the diet. If you're already feeding good-quality grass hay, you may want to switch to a grass hay with a light mix of legume. Offer your horse at least 20 pounds per day, and more if he will eat it. With spring in full swing, your horse will get even more calories if he has access to well-tended pasture.

Upping the intake of a high-fat, well-fortified grain will also be necessary, by as much as five pounds above what he's eating to maintain his current weight. Splitting the grain into three or more feedings might be necessary so no single meal is more than five pounds.

Exercise will increase your gelding's energy requirements. If you begin riding him during this period of weight gain, he will need even more energy to support an increase in body condition. In this case, a more reasonable schedule of weight gain might stretch to three or four months or beyond, especially if you do anything more than light work.

Be cautious when feeding horses to gain weight, as a slow progression to the desired body condition is healthier than any hurried attempt.

If you would like to submit a nutrition question, please contact Eileen Phethean at ephethean@ker.com or mail to: EQUESTRIAN Nutrition Questions, c/o Kentucky Equine Research, 3910 Delaney Ferry Road, Versailles, KY 40383.