

Feeding and managing insulin-resistant/laminitis-prone miniature horses

Maybe your mini has a heavy crest or they suffered a bout of lameness that was diagnosed as founder or laminitis. Each is a red flag that indicates they need special care and management to keep them sound. I have been dealing with laminitis-prone minis for 15+ years - one of them while being successfully shown - and have these recommendations.

First advice is to work with your vet who will likely test glucose and insulin levels for a diagnosis. If your horse is diagnosed as insulin resistant (IR) even if they have not been lame, they need attention so they remain sound!! If the horse is in pain, follow vet advice for pain reduction, activity restrictions, and need for x-rays. Emergency treatments may include putting the mini on dry lot, (NO grass) and soaking hay. Soaking means submerging in water for about 30 minutes and dumping the water the hay was soaked in which should be light tan. For minis, soaking can be done using mini hay nets and large buckets then hanging the hay nets. But there is another way: If you can find hay that has been tested and the ESC + starch <10% or the WSC + starch < 14%, it should be safe to use WITHOUT soaking. This is life-changing if you live in a cold climate where the soaked hay can freeze before it is all eaten! I have found several local suppliers that have second cutting grass hay that meets these criteria. Testing hay is something anyone should be able to do; I do not have a core sampler but just use long forceps to obtain similar size samples from at least 10 hay bales. I mix the samples together and send (in quart size zip-lock bag) to Dairy One in NY, (dairyone.com). Basic testing costs <\$20 a sample and results come via e-mail.

Along with the hay, I add Remission (I feed that twice daily with each grain meal) an inexpensive magnesium supplement which is promoted to reduce the risk of founder. Magnesium is also a key ingredient of calming supplements, so you should keep that in mind. I also feed soaked beet pulp with no sugar (molasses) added, which is handy to bind any supplements. I add a multi-vitamin PLUS Vitamin E which horses normally get from grass. Our 2 IR minis are also shown so they get exercise and small amounts of Nutrena Safe Choice Special Care. Exercise is important for any IR horse; some type of boots may be useful and regular hoof trims are important.

My history with founder goes back to my very first riding horse I got in 1960. She had a very heavy crest and I certainly did not understand the risk that posed in terms of laminitis. We also lived next to a restaurant and had no idea they were feeding her bread. Her first laminitic episode was from bread but was only the first of many, some of which were so bad euthanasia was discussed. That was why when one of our first minis showed signs of a heavy crest, we had her tested and found she was insulin resistant, so we started her on the treatments mentioned above.

Yes, you can show an IR mini! We had bought Princess to be shown at Pinto shows and went ahead with those plans. For showing I used neck sweats which worked quite effectively on her heavy crest. She was shown in Pinto in ALL mini classes and earned her Pinto Supreme Championship with >1,400 points in halter & performance. When showing I would have to give her handfuls of that low starch grain during the show to keep her energy level up - think carbo-loading for human athletes. She was shown again last year at age 17, with NO neck sweats but same diet- see photo below. She LOVES to show so she is getting another Coggins for this year. I also have plans for her in 2025 when our combined ages will equal 100 years and we will qualify for an award from the American Driving Society for entering a driven dressage test!



We don't monitor glucose and insulin levels constantly but Princess – even with treatment – foundered in late 2017 when her insulin was 193 (10-40 is normal). Then another mare (Dancer) foundered a few months later in January 2018 with insulin >200!!! By then Princess's insulin had dropped back to normal. Dancer had been under consideration for breeding to our young stallion (now gelding!) Shaboda, but two different vets strongly recommended not breeding an IR mare, so we heeded their advice.