



Body Condition Scoring: Evaluation of Excess Energy Reserves in Horses

The Educated Horseman: Management Series



Body condition scoring is a system designed to estimate the amount of stored energy reserves or fat. In horses; the evaluation of six specific locations leads to the assignment of a numeric score from 1 to 9 that allows comparison between horses.

This system requires both visual and physical palpation to assess the degrees of fatness. Usually all six locations (behind the shoulder, ribs, along the neck, withers, crease down the back and the tailhead) are equally important in determining a score, but differences in conformation, age, injury and physical fitness may cause confusion during a visual inspection and therefore require additional physical evaluation.

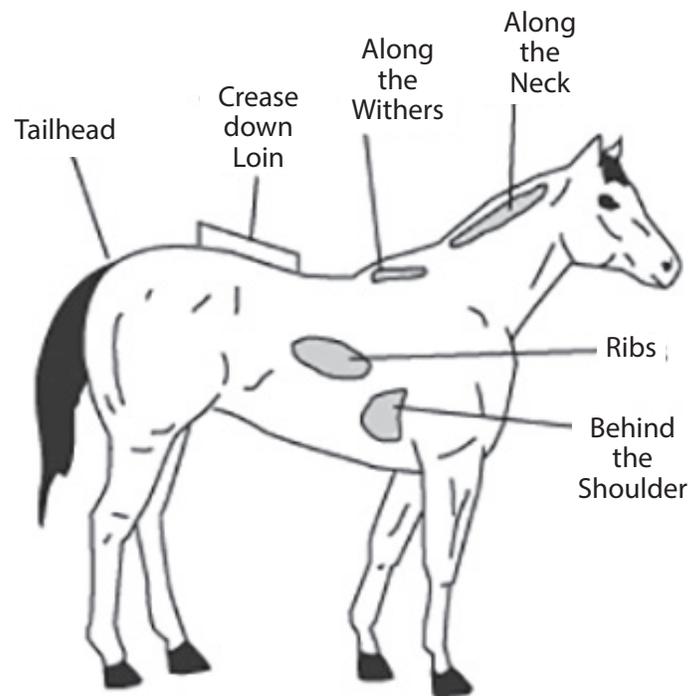
Fat is a tissue that stores excess energy and is produced when a horse digests more than what is needed to meet its energy needs. Horses that are in a negative energy balance or not fed enough to meet daily requirements will experience weight and body condition loss. This energy balance depends on multiple factors, including availability of adequate nutrients (food and water); physical activity level, including growth and health status; and athletic performance. The ability of horse owners to correctly assess body condition scores provides an adequate method to adjust feeding regimens to maintain horses at a desired level.

Body Condition Scoring

1-Poor. Animal is extremely emaciated. Spinous processes (backbone), ribs, tailhead and bony protrusions of the pelvic girdle are prominent. Bone structure of withers, shoulders and neck are easily noticeable. No fatty tissues can be felt.

2-Very Thin. Animal is emaciated. Slight fat covering over base of the spinous processes. Transverse processes of the lumbar (loin) feel rounded. Spinous processes, ribs, shoulders and neck structures are faintly discernable.

3-Thin. Fat is built up about halfway on spinous processes. Transverse processes cannot be felt. Slight fat covering over ribs. Spinous processes and ribs are



easily discernible. Tailhead is prominent, but individual vertebrae cannot be visually identified. Hook bones appear rounded but are easily discernable. Pin bones are not distinguishable. Withers, shoulders and neck are accentuated.

4-Moderately Thin. Negative crease along back. Faint outline of ribs is discernable. Fat can be felt around tailhead. Hook bones are not discernable. Withers, shoulders and neck are not obviously thin.

5-Moderate. Back is level. Ribs cannot be visually distinguished but can be felt easily. Fat around tailhead is spongy. Withers appear rounded and shoulders and neck blend smoothly into the body.

6-Moderate to Fleshy. May have slight crease down back. Fat over ribs feels spongy. Fat around tailhead feels soft. Fat begins to be deposited along the sides and withers, behind the shoulders and along the neck.

7-Fleshy. May have crease down back. Individual ribs can be felt, but there is noticeable filling of fat between ribs. Fat around tailhead is soft. Fat is deposited along withers, behind shoulders and along the neck.

8-Fat. Crease down back. Difficult to feel ribs. Fat around tailhead is very soft. Area along withers is filled with fat. Area behind shoulders is filled in and flush with the body. Noticeable thickening of neck. Fat is deposited along inner buttocks.

9-Extremely Fat. Obvious crease down back. Patchy fat appears over the ribs. Bulging fat around tailhead, along withers, behind shoulders and along neck. Fat along inner buttocks may rub together. Flank is filled in and flush with rest of the body.

The Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry's minimum care standards for horses requires a minimum body condition score of 3. The average horse should have a body condition score of 4-6.

It is important to remember that body condition cannot be altered significantly in a short period of time. Changes in muscle and fat stores must occur slowly to reduce the chance of ailments such as colic or founder. For example, increasing body condition score from a 3 to a 6 should take approximately four months depending on the stress level caused by environment and metabolic or growth status. Therefore, maintaining an adequate body condition score throughout the year is recommended.

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References

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