

Body Condition Scoring in Horses

Body condition scoring (BCS) is a method of estimating the amount of fat on a horse's body. The method was developed at Texas A&M University as a way for nutritionists, veterinarians, horse farm managers, and horse owners to evaluate nutritional status. The degree of condition is rated on a scale of one to nine. The rating is based on palpation and visual assessments

of fat deposits. The areas evaluated are illustrated at right. The ideal BCS for a given horse will depend on the stage of production and should range between four and seven. A BCS of four would be expected in horses in heavy race training. A BCS of five is recommended for growing and riding horses. The BCS of six is ideal for mares going into the breeding season. Before foaling, mares should have ample body fat reserves with a BCS of seven.

The evaluator should understand equine digestive function when making management decisions to change body condition. Make feeding changes gradually, as the digestive system of the horse is sensitive to changes in the diet. Horses are prone to colic or founder when abrupt changes are made.

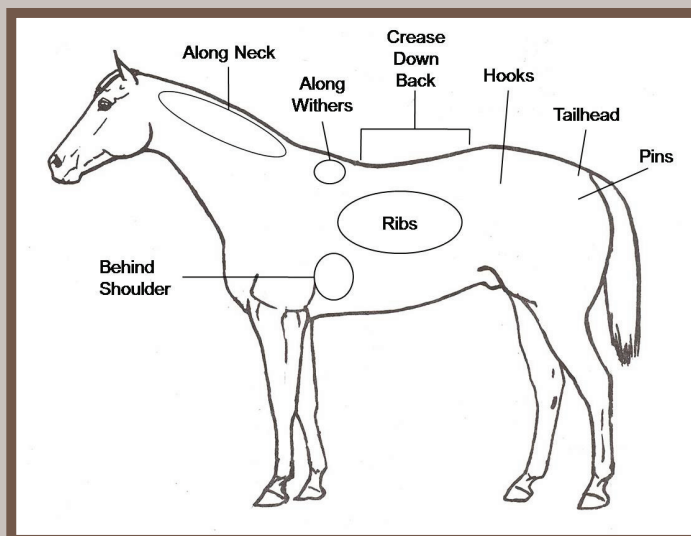
Gradual increases or decreases in feed consumption are recommended to control weight gain or loss. It should take at least 8 weeks to increase BCS in a horse by one level safely. For a horse between 14 and 15 hands tall, the difference in body weight from one BCS to another is between 100 and 165 pounds. When increasing body condition in horses,

select feeds that have a greater energy density. Providing feeds with greater energy density can increase body weight without adding feed volume.

To decrease body condition, the horse should eat a diet that has a lower energy density. Horses eating a lesser quality forage to decrease body condition should also

have a vitamin and mineral supplement to maintain good health. Feeding concentrates that are formulated specifically for horses will ensure that the nutrients are balanced to meet the needs of the horse.

Reference: Henneke, DR, GD Potter, JL Kreider, and BF Yeates. 1983. Relationship between condition score, physical measurements and body fat percentage in mares. *Equine Vet J.* 15:371-382.



Key Points

When evaluating horses to estimate body condition, keep these points in mind:

- Horses that are fed free-choice hay will often develop a “hay belly.” When foals are weaned, they will also develop a prominent belly. This is from gut distention and should not be confused with fat.
- Pregnant mares in late gestation will develop an enlarged belly as the fetus continues to grow inside the mare. It is important to know if the mare is pregnant so that you can meet her nutrient requirements.
- Not all horses are proportioned equally. Horses that are tall and long will look leaner than horses that are short and compact.
- Horses will grow longer hair in the winter and often times appear fatter than they truly are.

Body Condition Scores | Score Description

1

Poor

Extremely emaciated; no fatty tissue can be felt. Ribs, spine, withers, hooks and pins projecting prominently. Bony structure of withers, shoulders and neck are easily seen.



2

2

Very Thin

Emaciated. Slight amount of fat covering the base of the spine. Transverse process of lumbar vertebrae feels round. Tailhead, hooks, pins, spine and ribs are prominent. Neck, withers and shoulders are faintly discernible.



6

3

Thin

Tailhead is prominent but individual vertebrae cannot be visually identified. Hook bones appear rounded, but are visible. Pin bones are not distinguishable. Slight fat cover over ribs, but easily discernible.



3



7

4

Moderately Thin

Negative crease along back. Hook bones are not discernible. Faint outline of ribs is evident. Withers, shoulders and neck are not obviously thin.



4



8

5

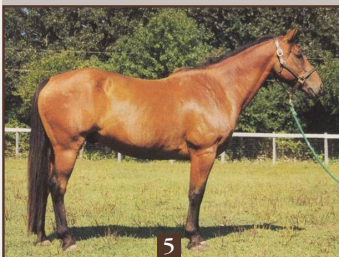
Moderate

Fat around tailhead feels spongy. Ribs are not visually distinguishable, but can be felt. Withers appear rounded. Neck and shoulders blend smoothly into body.

6

Moderately Fleshy

Fat around tailhead feels soft. Fat over ribs feels spongy. Fat beginning to be deposited behind the shoulders, on the sides of neck and withers.



5



9

7

Fleshy

Individual ribs can be felt, but noticeable filling of fat between ribs. Fat around the tailhead is soft. Fat is deposited along neck, withers and behind shoulder.

8

Fat

Tailhead fat is very soft. A positive crease is formed down the back. Difficult to feel ribs. Area behind shoulder is filled in flush with body. Noticeable thickening of the neck. Fat deposited along inner buttocks.

9

Extremely Fat

Bulging fat around tailhead. Patchy fat appears over ribs. Bulging fat on neck, withers and shoulder. Obvious positive crease down back. Fat along inner buttocks may rub together. The flank is filled in flush with body.

Copyright 2008 by Mississippi State University. All rights reserved. This publication may be copied and distributed without alteration for nonprofit educational purposes provided that credit is given to the Mississippi State University Extension Service.

By **Dr. Preston Buff**, Assistant Extension Professor, Animal and Dairy Sciences.

Discrimination based upon race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status is a violation of federal and state law and MSU policy and will not be tolerated. Discrimination based upon sexual orientation or group affiliation is a violation of MSU policy and will not be tolerated.

Publication 2465

Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. VANCE H. WATSON, Director (500-04-08)