

# Animal Sciences Horses

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## Introduction to Body Condition Scoring Horses

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All horse owners want their horses to be healthy, look good, and be physically fit athletes. Most have a sense that these three things are connected. But how? Can you tell whether or not a horse is healthy just by looking at it? What does a healthy horse look like? And, once you've recognized the state of your horse's health, what can you do about it? These are good questions. The problem is, almost every horse owner would answer them differently. The purpose of this publication is to establish a common language and frame of reference to stimulate discussion, and inform policy regarding humane horse care and management.

### Normal Body Condition

The body condition or degree of fat cover of horses is a good indicator of their general health. Determining proper body condition comes from long hours of practice examining many horses of different body types. However, a condition scoring system designed to gauge reproductive efficiency in mares (Henneke et al., 1983) can serve as a guide to judging the health and fitness of all horses (Table 1). The anatomical locations for evaluation are indicated in Figure 1.

The process for evaluating body condition is quite simple. The evaluator needs to make both a visual appraisal and a manual appraisal of the fat cover over the areas indicated in Figure 1. It is also useful to observe the horse in motion, especially when evaluating the fat cover over the ribs.

Healthy horses usually have a score between 4 and 6, depending on their level of fitness. Scores lower than 4 or higher than 6 on this scale indicate the likelihood of metabolic and other health problems, as well as raising questions relative to humane treatment and care of the horse.

The type and amount of food and exercise primarily determine the weight and body condition of the horse. Energy is derived primarily from carbohydrates, fats, and any protein excesses, and is the foundation for balancing equine diets. Energy is needed for body functions, including maintenance, temperature regulation, digestion, and work.



A- Point of buttock	B- Tailhead	C- Point of hip
D- Back	E- Wither	F- Crest of neck
G- Behind shoulder	H- Over ribs	

Figure 1. Anatomical points to evaluate for body condition scoring.

All energy provided in the feedstuffs that is in excess to what is needed goes toward the formation of fat. A deficiency of energy in the diet will reduce the body condition score (fat) before the biological needs will be sacrificed. Prolonged deficiencies will result in unthriftiness and starvation. Excesses of energy in the diet can cause obesity, which can, in turn, cause many metabolic diseases such as laminitis (founder), osteochondrosis, epiphysitis, tying-up syndrome, and colic.

Regular body condition scoring of your horses is a valuable tool for proper horse management. Once you have identified the appropriate body condition score for your horse, you can evaluate the horse regularly and adjust the feed intake and exercise to maintain the proper body condition score. It is especially important to condition

The following table may be used to estimate your horse's fitness (Table 1).

**Table 1: Horse Condition Scoring System\***

Score	Condition Description
1- Poor	Animal extremely emaciated. Spinous processes, ribs, tailhead, and point of hip and point of buttocks project prominently; bone structure of withers, shoulders, and neck easily noticeable; no fatty tissue can be felt.
2- Very Thin	Animal emaciated. Slight fat covering over the base of spinous processes; transverse processes of the lumbar vertebrae feel rounded; spinous processes, ribs, tailhead, and point of hip and point of buttocks prominent; withers, shoulders, and neck structures faintly discernible.
3- Thin	Fat built up about halfway on the spinous processes; transverse processes cannot be felt; slight fat cover over ribs; spinous processes and ribs easily discernible; tailhead prominent, but individual vertebrae cannot be identified visually; point of buttocks appear rounded but easily discernible; point of hip not distinguishable; withers, shoulders, and neck accentuated.
4- Moderately Thin	Slight ridge along back; faint outline of ribs discernible; tailhead prominence depends on conformation, but fat can be felt around it; point of hip not discernible; withers, shoulders, and neck not obviously thin.
5- Moderate	Back is flat (no crease or ridge); ribs not visually distinguishable but easily felt; fat around tailhead beginning to feel spongy; withers appear rounded over spinous processes; shoulders and neck blend smoothly into body.
6- Moderate to Fleishy	May be slight crease down back; fat over ribs spongy; fat around tailhead soft; fat beginning to be deposited along the side of withers, behind shoulders, and along the sides of neck.
7- Fleishy	May have crease down back; individual ribs can be felt, but there is noticeable fat between ribs; fat around tailhead soft; fat deposited along withers, behind shoulders, and along neck.
8- Fat	Crease down back; difficult to feel ribs; fat around tailhead very soft; area along withers filled with fat; area behind shoulder filled with fat; noticeable thickening of neck; fat deposited along inner thighs.
9- Extremely Fat	Obvious crease down back; patchy fat appearing over ribs; bulging fat around tailhead, along withers, behind shoulders, and along neck; fat along inner thighs may cause them to rub together; flank filled with fat.

\* Adapted from Henneke et al., 1983.

score the horse during the winter, when extra energy is utilized to maintain body temperature, and the winter hair coat makes visual observation more difficult.

### Literature Cited

Evans, J. W., A. Borton, H.F. Hintz, and L.D. VanVleck. 1990. *The Horse*, Second Edition. W.H. Freeman and Co., New York, New York.

Henneke, D. R., G. D. Potter, J. L. Kreider, and B. F. Yeates. 1983. Relationship between condition score, physical measurement, and body fat percentage in mares. *Eq. Vet. J.* 15:371-372.

*Horse Industry Handbook*. The American Youth Horse Council. 1-800- TRY- AYHC [www.ayhc.com](http://www.ayhc.com)

### Additional References

The following Purdue Cooperative Extension Service references are available online, or from your County Extension office.

ID-269 Equine Body Condition Scoring (poster)

AS-554-W Intro to Horse Management

AS-553-W Intro to Horse Housing

DVD-4-H-995 Our First Horse: Considerations before you Buy DVD; <http://www.ourfirsthorse.info>

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