

Body Condition Scoring Your Horse

The best friend a horse can have is an observant, astute and informed owner who can look at a horse and accurately assess their condition as a reflection of their nutritional and health status. Following are some general notes and guidelines to be followed by more detailed notes on specific cases that we have encountered.

Body condition scoring is traditionally scoring the amount and distribution of fat that a horse has, which is a direct result of the calorie status of the feed they are on. Scoring charts will vary from country to country but most score within the range of one to five. Body scoring for fatness is independent of breed, weight, size and amounts of muscle.

Excess calories in the diet are stored as fat. Fat is laid down around the neck, withers, shoulders, topline (the area from the shoulders to the tail head), and the ribs (Figure 1). With increasing fat storage these areas fill out and become smoother. Feeling for fat over the ribs is a good guide as it is not then confused with muscle. Combine visual assessment with palpation to assess fat cover. If calories are deficient in the diet the horse will lose weight and become visibly thinner.

Another area to look at when assessing a horse's appearance is the muscle development. Muscle development is usually assessed along the topline and a protein deficient diet will result in a poor topline. The topline is determined by the amount and balance of amino acids in the diet. Genetics also plays a role in muscle appearance. A horse that is spelling will have a different topline to a horse in full work. A sway back conformation will also affect muscle development along the topline. Aged horses will have a

development along the topline is the last to develop and the first area to be lost when protein is in short supply. If a horse is very muscle wasted and then put onto a good diet it will redevelop the muscles in the reverse order to when they were lost – i.e. hindquarter, croup, loin and topline.

In reality, if a diet is calorie deficient it is usually also protein deficient and the resultant appearance of the horse will reflect this with poor fat cover and wasted muscles. Occasionally a horse will be on a high grain diet (excess calories) but limited roughage (reduced protein quality and quantity) and combined with mineral and vitamin imbalances will give the appearance of very poor health and low body score.

The appearance of the coat will also give a good indication of condition and health – a smooth shiny coat with good depth of colour is a very good indicator of basic health and wellness. Dull, rough and washed out colours indicate dietary imbalances that need to be addressed.

A healthy well fed horse will have a bright demeanour and be alert and interested in the environment. Horses that are malnourished have a flat, lethargic look and their eyes will look dull. By looking at your horses eyes you can quickly assess if they are in pain, stressed, anxious or ill.

Good doers are those individuals who maintain their body weight and condition very easily in normal paddock or field situations. They require relatively less feed than the poor doers whose owners have difficulty keeping condition on. Draft breeds, ponies and quarter horses are largely good doers though there will always be some individuals within the breed who are different. Arabs and thoroughbreds tend to be poor doers and require more food for their body weight than a good doer. Shy horses in a group or herd situation may have poorer body condition due to competition for food.

Condition Score 1 – Very Thin

- Sunken rump
- Prominent poverty line in hind quarters
- Cavity under tail
- Ribs prominent
- Prominent backbone and croup
- Ewe neck, narrow and slack
- Dull coat Lethargic

These two horses (Figure 2 & 3) are examples of condition score 1. The horse in Figure 2 has no fat cover and pronounced muscle wasting and is at the lower end of score 1. He is an aged horse who has virtually no teeth to chew food with. He wasn't able to make use of what pasture and hay was available due to his dental condition. His new owner was able to formulate a special diet for him that he could ingest and he quickly picked up condition. Equilibrium / LexveT Mineral Mix played a major role in enabling his body to have the macro and trace minerals he needed to convert feed to condition and normal bodily function.

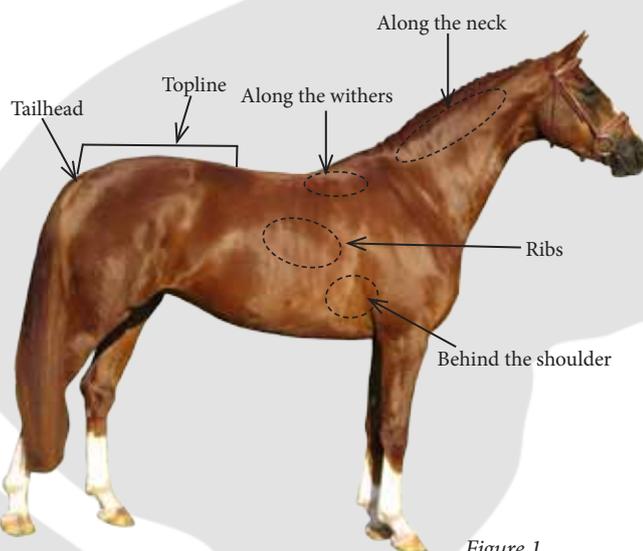


Figure 1

softening of their muscle structures and heavily pregnant mares will appear to have a poorer topline than other horses due to the weight of the foal in the uterus and the softening of ligaments around the tail head just prior to birth. Thoroughbreds tend to have more prominent withers while pony and draft breeds are fleshier.

Excess protein is not stored in the body and is excreted through the urinary system. If the diet is protein deficient muscle mass is sacrificed and the topline becomes compromised. Muscle

The horse in Figure 3 was neglected with inadequate food supplied to maintain body condition and health. When offered adequate hay and pasture and supplemented with Equilibrium / LexveT Mineral Mix she quickly picked up in condition

Both these horses not only had calorie and protein deficient diets they also had very low levels of macro and trace minerals and vitamins. It will take some months for the mineral and vitamin levels to return to optimal levels and ongoing supplementation with minerals and vitamins is essential to prevent a recurrence of deficiencies.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Condition Score 2 – Thin

- Flat rump on either side of backbone
- Poverty line still visible
- Ribs just visible
- Narrow but firm neck
- Backbone covered
- Dull coats
- Dull to slightly dull look in eyes
- Poor work tolerance

The horses in figures 4, 5 and 6 are all examples of condition score 2. The horse in Figure 4 is the same horse as seen in condition score 1 after just one week on his new diet. He still has a long way to go but already he is starting to fill out with muscling and fat cover.



Figure 4



Figure 5

The chestnut mare (Figure 5) is a pregnant thoroughbred mare that was being misfed by her owner. She had a high grain diet and very limited access to hay and pasture. She wasn't calorie deficient but her overall appearance is consistent with protein deficiency, mineral and vitamin imbalances. The overload of grain inhibited normal digestion and dramatically affected mineral absorption and levels especially calcium and phosphorus. Notice her lethargic demeanour, poor coat quality and dull eyes. Her grain intake was halved and she was fed ad lib good quality hay, supplemented with minerals and vitamins (Equilibrium / LexveT Mineral Mix) and she rapidly improved and went on to deliver a healthy foal with straight legs.



Figure 6

This horse (Figure 6) is at the higher end of score 2. He had access to hay and pasture and a supplement. He looks slightly underdone with his ribs only showing but reasonably good muscling. With the addition of Equilibrium / LexveT Mineral Mix he became a score 3 within 4 weeks. In this case he either had an imbalance or deficiency in vitamins or minerals resulting in an inability to utilise his feed properly.

Condition Score 3 – Ideal Condition

- Rounded rump
- Ribs just covered but easily felt
- No crest, firm neck
- Alert demeanour
- Bright eyes
- Healthy coats

The desired condition for a horse is a smooth body where the ribs are not visually evident but can be felt easily. The back is level when viewed from on top with no creases or ridges evident. The withers are rounded and the shoulder and neck blend cleanly into the body. The fat at the tailhead will feel spongy and muscles of the hindleg are evident.

A diet where there is no calorie excess and providing good quality protein and where, just as importantly, the minerals and vitamins are supplied in adequate amounts and in correct ratios will produce a horse that looks a picture of health.

All these horses (Figure 7, 8 and 9) are well covered with fat and so they appear smooth with no bony protrusions. Figure 7,



Figure 7



Figure 8

8, 9 show breed differences in muscling, all are well rounded and have normal muscle development. All these horses have a healthy coat, a bright eye and alert demeanour. They have the energy to do whatever work is required of them as long as they are trained correctly. On going mineral and vitamin supplementation is required to keep these horses in this condition as well as ad lib access to good quality pasture and hay.



Figure 9

Condition Score 4 – Fat

- Well – rounded rump
- Gutter along back
- Ribs and pelvis hard to feel
- Slight crest on neck

A fat horse needs the hard feed intake reduced or eliminated from the diet.

This horse (Figure 10) is starting to get too fat with extra fat being laid down at the base of the neck and over the ribs. She would



Figure 10

not be in the peak of health as score 3 horses are and would be starting to find physical exertion harder. A lot of ponies are good doers and become score 4 very easily. Reducing their calorie intake is important to prevent future health issues. Supplementation with minerals and vitamins is still essential to keep them healthy as reducing the calorie intake would also decrease mineral and vitamin intake.

Condition Score 5 – Too Fat

- Very bulging rump
- Deep gutter along back
- Ribs buried
- Marked crest on neck
- Folds and lumps of fat

Condition score 5 horses should not be receiving a concentrated hard feed. A calorie free supplement is recommended to fed as a loose lick or with a handful of chaff.

A condition score 5 horse or pony is very fat and more likely to suffer laminitis, insulin resistance, metabolic disease and other chronic health issues. They would find physical exertion difficult and are not fit and healthy. Adjusting their diet and calorie intake is critical for their long term health.

Unfortunately (or fortunately depending how you see it) we do not have any photos of Score 5 horses

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