

Horsing around:

How to determine body condition



Birgit Stutz

Do you know how to properly evaluate your horse's body condition instead of just using terms such as "skinny" or "fat", which are subjective terms that have different meanings to different people? While there are several methods to judge a horse's body condition, one of the most widely used is the Henneke Body Condition Scoring Chart, which was developed in 1983 by Dr. Don Henneke of Tarleton State Texas University. The Henneke chart is a standardized scoring system that can be used to evaluate a horse's body condition regardless of its breed, body type, age or sex. The Henneke chart is also used by law enforcement agencies as an objective method of scoring a horse's body condition in horse cruelty cases.

The Henneke chart is based on both visual evaluation and palpable fat cover of the six major points of the horse that are most responsive to changes in body fat: neck, withers (point where the neck ends and the back begins), the shoulder area, ribs, loins, and the tailhead area.

The chart rates horses on a scale of one to nine. A body score of five is considered ideal. A body score of between four and seven is considered acceptable. A score of nine is extremely fat or obese. A horse that is rated a one is considered poor or emaciated with no body fat. It is often described as a walking skeleton and is in real danger of dying.

If a horse is exposed to extreme cold or some other severe stress, a score of six or seven would be desired, as a horse can burn a lot of fat in a short period of time in a high stress situation. A horse below a score of five may not have enough fat stored to stay healthy if stressed. Body fat reserves are important to the

overall health of a horse because fat represents energy reserves that can be used during times of stress. Horses at a score of three or below have virtually no fat reserves, so if more energy is needed, protein is broken down from muscle in order to meet energy requirements. On the other hand, horses with high body condition scores are also predisposed to problems, for example laminitis.

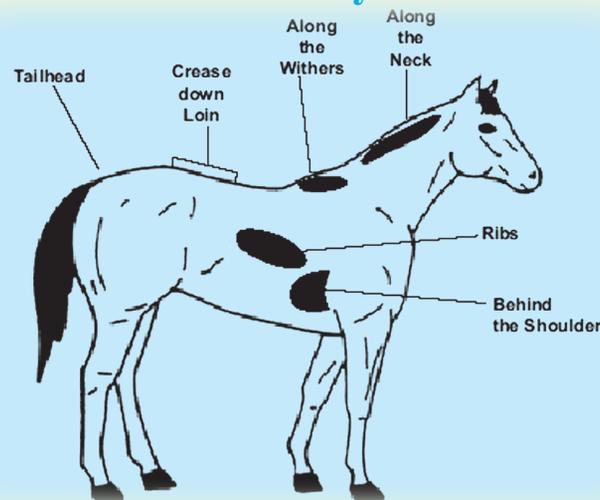
The horse's body condition measures the balance between intake and expenditure of energy. A positive energy balance (which means the energy expenditure is less than the energy intake) will result in a horse adding fat and muscle and improving body condition. If there is a negative energy balance (which means the energy loss is greater than the energy intake), then weight, and subsequent body condition, will be lost.

Body condition can be affected by a variety of factors such as availability of food and water, weather (for example temperature and wind chill), reproductive activity (for example pregnancy and lactation), performance or work activities, parasites, and dental problems. Remember that horses need extra energy intake during the cold winter months in order to stay warm.

To determine your horse's body score, visually inspect your horse and then palpate each part of the horse with your hands to feel for body fat. Make sure you apply pressure to each part as simply stroking the animal lightly won't provide an accurate evaluation of the horse's condition. Then assign each area of the body the numerical score that corresponds with the horse's condition. Palpation is especially important in the winter time, as a long hair coat can be misleading. Except in very extreme cases, the horse's long hair coat will hide the protruding bones.

Since horses have different conformational characteristics, it may be difficult to apply certain criteria within each score to every horse. For example, animals with prominent withers may cause body condition scores to be lower than they actually are. In these instances, those areas influenced by conformation should be discounted, but not ignored, when determining the condition score.

Description of the Henneke Body Condition Score System



1 - Poor:

Emaciated - Prominent spinous processes, ribs, tailhead and hooks and pins. Noticeable bone structure on withers, shoulders and neck. No fatty tissues can be palpated.

2 - Very Thin:

Emaciated. Slight fat covering over base of spinous processes. Transverse processes of lumbar vertebrae feel rounded. Prominent spinous processes, ribs, tailhead and hooks and pins. Withers, shoulders and neck structures faintly discernible.

3 - Thin:

Fat built up about halfway on 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 visually identified. Hook bones ap-

pear rounded, but easily discernible. Pin bones not distinguishable. Withers, shoulders and neck accentuated.

4 - Mod Thin:

Negative crease along back. Faint outline of ribs discernible. Tailhead prominence depends on conformation, fat can be felt around it. Hook bones not discernible. Withers, shoulders and neck not obviously thin.

5 - Moderate:

Back is level. Ribs cannot be visually distinguished, but can be easily felt. Fat around tailhead beginning to feel spongy. Withers appear rounded over spinous processes. Shoulders and neck blend smoothly into body.

6 - Mod to Fleishy:

May have slight crease down back. Fat over ribs feels spongy. Fat around tailhead feels soft. Fat beginning to be deposited along the sides

of the withers, behind the shoulders and along the sides of the neck.

7 - Fleishy:

May have crease down back. Individual ribs can be felt, but noticeable filling between ribs with fat. Fat around tailhead is soft. Fat deposits along withers, behind shoulders and along the neck.

8 - Fat:

Crease down back. Difficult to palpate ribs. Fat around tailhead very soft. Area along withers filled with fat. Area behind shoulder filled in flush. Noticeable thickening of neck. Fat deposited along inner buttocks.

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 buttocks may rub together. Flank filled in flush.

The scores from each area are then totaled and divided by six. The resulting number is the horse's rating on the Henneke Body Scoring Condition Chart.

The University of Maine has some very good tips on what to look for when evaluating your horse:

Loin: An extremely thin horse will have a negative crease and a ridge down the back where the spinous processes projects up. No fat can be felt along the back of the horse. However, this is one of the first areas to fill in as a horse gains weight. Fat is first laid down around body organs, then along the base of the spinous processes. As the horse gets fatter, an obvious crease or depression forms down the back because of fat accumulation along the spinous processes.

Ribs: The next place to look is in the ribs. Visually assess the rib area, then run your fingers across the rib cage. A very thin horse will have prominent ribs, easily seen

and felt, with no fat padding. As the horse begins to gain weight, a little padding can be felt around the ribs. With a score of five, the ribs will no longer be visible, but can be easily palpated by passing a hand down the rib cage. Once the horse progresses towards obesity, feeling the ribs will be impossible.

Tailhead: In a very thin horse up to a score of three, the tailhead is prominent and easily discernible. Once the horse starts gaining weight, fat fills in around the tailhead. As the horse becomes obese, the fat will feel soft and begin to bulge.

Withers: Conformation of the withers may affect your assessment of body condition. The prominence or sharpness of the withers may vary between breeds. However, if a horse is very thin, the underlying structure of the withers will be easily visible. At a score of five, the withers will appear rounded. At levels six

through eight, varying degrees of fat deposits can be felt along the withers. In obese horses, the withers will be bulging with fat.

Neck: The neck allows for refining the assessment of body condition. In an extremely thin horse, you will be able to see the bone structure of the neck, and the throatlatch will be very trim. As the horse gains condition, fat will be deposited down the top of the neck. A body condition score of eight is characterized by a neck that is thick all around with fat evident at the crest and the throatlatch.

Shoulder: The shoulder will also help you refine the condition score, especially if conformation factors have made some other criteria less helpful. As a horse gains weight, fat is deposited around the shoulder to help it blend smoothly with the body. At increasing condition scores, fat is deposited behind the shoulder, especially in the region behind the elbow.