



Body Condition Scoring in Your Horse

The start of the New Year often brings about resolutions for a better self. One of the most common New Year's resolutions is to lose weight or get in shape. Keeping in shape and living healthy is important for us as well as our horse. Whether your horse is a pasture pet or a competition horse, their body condition and weight is key to a healthy horse. Body Condition Scoring or BCS is a common method of estimating the amount of body fat in a horse.

The BCS was developed at Texas A&M University and provides a standard of measurement to evaluate nutritional status. The degree of condition is based on a scale of one to nine, with one being poor and nine being extremely obese. The ideal BCS for a given horse will depend on their age, activity and should range from four to seven. A BCS of four would be ideal for a horse in heavy training, while a BCS of five is recommended for growing and riding horses. As we head into breeding season, a BCS of six is ideal for mares, but as they approach foaling they will need ample body fat reserves and you should expect to see a BCS of seven. For horses living in a cold climate it is recommended that they have a BCS of six or seven so that there are no surprises as they shed out and move into Spring and Summer. The reserve fat will help keep them warm.

A series of palpation points are used to assess BCS in horses. These points are demonstrated in the photo below.

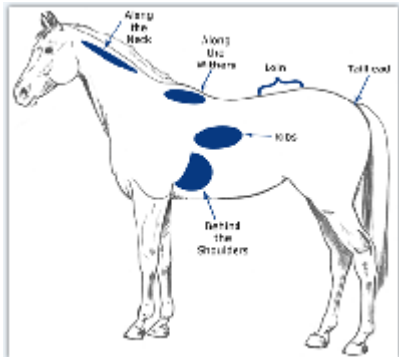


Photo: Feedxl.com (<http://feedxl.com/newsletters/1-why-body-condition-score.html>)

Neck: In a thin horse you will be able to see the bone structure of the neck, and the throatlatch will be very trim. As they gain weight, fat will be deposited on the top of the neck. Horses at level eight or nine will have a neck that is thick all around with fat evident at the crest and throatlatch.

Withers: Withers can be a difficult area to judge as they may vary from breed to breed. A Thoroughbred typically will have more prominent withers than a Quarter Horse. However, a horse that is very thin will have withers that are easily visible. As they reach BCS five, the withers will appear rounded. At BCS six to eight, fat deposits can be felt around the withers and at BCS nine the withers will be bulging with fat.

Loin: An extremely thin horse will have a negative crease and a ridge down the back. No fat can be felt along the back of the horse, yet this is one of the first areas to fill in when a horse gains weight. As the horse gets fatter, an obvious crease or depression will form down the back because of the fat accumulation.

Tailhead: In BCS one to three, the tailhead is prominent and easy to see. As they gain weight, fat will fill in around the tailhead. The fat can be easily palpated. As they progress to BCS nine, the fat will feel soft and begin to bulge.

Ribs: Visually assess the rib area, and then run your fingers across the rib cage. A very thin horse will have prominent ribs that are easily seen and felt; they will have no fat padding in this area. As they gain weight the fat will make padding for the ribs. By BCS five the ribs will no longer be visible, but they can be easily palpated. If the horse gains too much weight and progresses to a level nine you will not be able to palpate the ribs.

Shoulder: As a horse gains weight fat will be deposited around the shoulder helping to blend smoothly with the rest of the body. As they move into the higher levels fat is deposited behind the shoulder, especially in the region of the elbow.

This [chart](#) provides you with a series of photos to help you better understand the BCS and how your horse should look.

Discuss with your veterinarian what the ideal BCS should be for your horse, and if necessary, the best way to change their diet or exercise plan so that weight is taken off or put on in the proper way. They can also help you with the proper way to use the BCS to judge where your horse is at and how they will change as weight is lost or gained. Once the ideal BCS has been established it will become a valuable tool in your horse management. Evaluate your horse regularly and adjust his feed intake and exercise to maintain the proper BCS.

Since 2014 is the year of the horse, let this be a new year and new you for you and your horse!

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