

NUTRITION AND BODY CONDITION

(Courtesy of Bayer Healthcare, Purina Mills, and Bend Equine Medical Center)

Maintaining an ideal body condition in your horse requires a balance between proper nutrition and exercise. Just like with humans, horses have many different body types, and maintaining proper condition is not always straightforward. Some horses are “easy keepers”, gaining weight just by looking at food, while others are “hard keepers”, struggling to maintain a proper body condition despite the amount of food they eat. People commonly believe that only thin horses are unhealthy – this is not true. Excess weight on a horse can be equally as harmful as lack of nutrition.

UNDERNUTRITION (THIN)

A thin horse is not receiving proper nutrition. They are not able to perform at the best of their ability and may show signs of lethargy or lack of energy. Without proper nutrition, horses are more prone to developing disease. Poor body condition can be caused by:

- Insufficient amount of food
 - It is important to remember that this category does not strictly refer to starving a horse. Some horses require extra energy for their performance or reproductive needs.
- Parasitism
- Dental disease (malocclusion in the mouth, sharp points, missing teeth in older horses)
- Chronic disease (kidney, liver, heart)

OBESITY

Typically, given the opportunity, a horse will eat much more than he needs, tipping the scale into an unhealthy balance. **No matter how much your horse enjoys eating, you do it a disservice by overfeeding.** Excess pounds put a strain on virtually every body system. The best strategy is to supply food and exercise in proper amounts to keep your horse fit and healthy. Carrying excess weight can contribute to the development of the following conditions:

- Laminitis (founder)
- Developmental Orthopedic Diseases (osteochondrosis dessicans, physitis)
- Greater strain on feet, joints, and limbs (worsening of arthritis)
- Reduced reproductive efficiency
- Greater lethargy and more easily fatigued

EVALUATING BODY CONDITION

The following chart provided by Purina Mills shows where to evaluate your horse to determine their body condition score. There are six conformation points used for evaluation: (See illustration) **A-** the amount of flesh or fat covering along the neck, **B-** the withers, **C-** down the crease of the back, **D-** the tailhead, **E-** the ribs and **F-** behind the shoulder (at the girth). Scores range from 1-9, from poor to extremely fat.

WHAT'S IDEAL

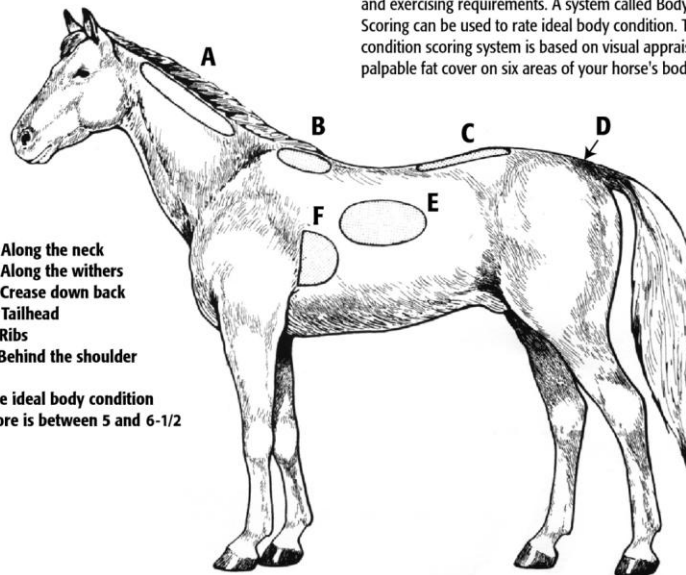
For most horses, body condition scores in the Moderate to Moderately Fleshy range, (scores of 5 and 6) are ideal. A commonly recited suggestion is to keep your horse where you can feel the divisions between his/her ribs but not be able to see them. However, keep in mind that the job of your particular athlete also has a bearing on what weight is appropriate for maximum performance. Polo, race and endurance horses might be perfectly fit with body condition scores of 4 (moderately thin), while a body condition score of 7 (fleshy) may be required for success in the show ring. However, by feeding a horse to a level of 8, you are starting to push the limits of good health. Horses with scores of 8 and 9 are definite candidates for a weight reduction plan.



Purina Mills

Body Condition Scoring

Many physiological functions in horses are influenced by body condition including horse's maintenance, reproductive and exercising requirements. A system called Body Condition Scoring can be used to rate ideal body condition. This condition scoring system is based on visual appraisal and palpable fat cover on six areas of your horse's body.



- A. Along the neck
- B. Along the withers
- C. Crease down back
- D. Tailhead
- E. Ribs
- F. Behind the shoulder

The ideal body condition score is between 5 and 6-1/2

Description of Individual Condition Scores (Score 1-9)

- 1. Poor:** Animal extremely emaciated; spinous processes, ribs, tailhead, tuber coxae (hip joints), and ischia (lower pelvic bones) projecting 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 base of spinous processes; transverse processes of lumbar vertebrae feel rounded; spinous processes, ribs, tailhead, tuber coxae (hip joints) and ischia (lower pelvic bones) prominent; withers, shoulders and neck structure faintly discernible.
- 3. Thin:** Fat buildup 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 identified visually; tuber coxae (hip joints) appear rounded but easily discernible; tuber ischia (lower pelvic bones) not distinguishable; withers, shoulders and neck accentuated.
- 4. Moderately Thin:** Slight ridge along back; faint outline of ribs discernible; tailhead prominence depends on conformation, fat can be felt around it; tuber coxae (hips joints) 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. Moderately Fleshy:** May have 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 sides of neck.
- 7. Fleshy:** May have crease down back; individual ribs can be felt, but noticeable filling between ribs with fat; 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 rub together; flank filled with fat.