

BCS

A USEFUL TOOL

Don Henneke's nine-point scale takes the guesswork out of evaluating equine body fat levels.

The body condition score (BCS) system offers an objective method of estimating a horse's body fat levels.

Developed 25 years ago by Don Henneke, PhD, as part of his doctoral research, the BCS scale ranges from 1 (poor) to 9 (obese). Horses are scored based on visual and hands-on appraisal of six body areas where fat tends to accumulate in a predictable pattern (see diagram below).

At right is an illustrated guide to the BCS system. Each score is accompanied by the notable physical attributes described in Henneke's original BCS research. The key terms used include:

- **crease**—a “gutter” over the spine created by fat buildup on either side of the bone.

- **hooks**—the pelvic (hip) bones that jut out to the side of a horse's rump.

- **pins**—pelvic bones near the tail that poke out the back of a horse's rump.

- **spinous processes**—bony protrusions at the top of the vertebrae of the torso.

- **tailhead**—the root of the tail where it blends in with the body; highest movable point on the tail.

- **transverse processes**—bony protrusions on each side of the vertebrae.



Score: 1 (Poor)

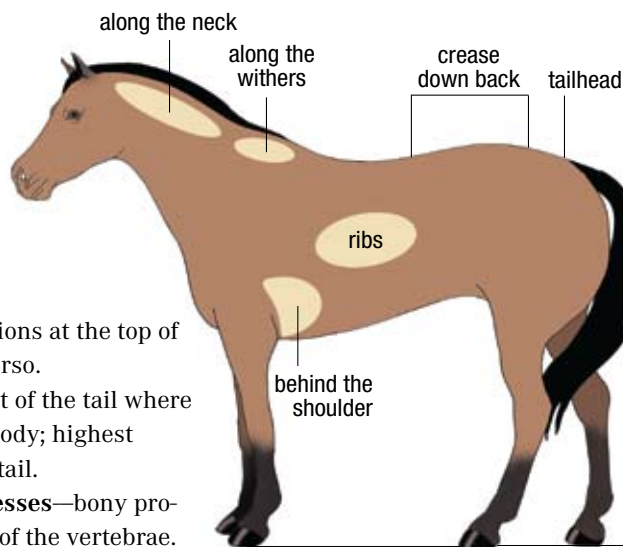
- Extreme emaciation.
- Spinous processes, ribs, tailhead, and hooks and pins are prominent.
- Bone structure of withers, shoulder and neck is easily noticeable.
- No fatty tissue can be felt.



Score: 2 (Very thin)

- Emaciated.
- Thin layer of fat over base of spinous processes.
- Transverse processes of lumbar vertebrae feel rounded.
- Spinous processes, ribs, tailhead, and hooks and pins are prominent.
- Withers, shoulders and neck structures are faintly discernable.

GETTING FAT: Horses develop body fat in a predictable pattern, starting behind the shoulder, moving back over the ribs, up over the rump and finally along the back forward to the neck and head. A horse's BCS is based on an appraisal of fat accumulation in these areas.



Score: 6 (Moderate to fleshy)

- May have slight crease down back.
- Fat over ribs feels soft and spongy.
- Fat around tailhead feels soft.
- Fat beginning to be deposited along sides of the withers, behind the shoulders and along the sides of the neck.



Score: 3 (Thin)

- Fat about halfway up spinous processes; transverse processes cannot be felt.
- Thin fat layer over ribs.
- Spinous processes and ribs are easily discernable.
- Tailhead prominent, but individual vertebrae cannot be visually identified.
- Hook bones appear rounded but not easily discernable.
- Pin bones not distinguishable.
- Withers, shoulders and neck are accentuated.



Score: 4 (Moderately thin)

- Ridge along back.
- Faint outline of ribs discernable.
- Tailhead prominence depends on conformation; fat can be felt around it.
- Hook bones not discernable.
- Withers, shoulders and neck are not obviously thin.



Score: 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.



Score: 7 (Fleshy)

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



Score: 8 (Fat)

- Crease down back.
- Difficult to feel 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.



Score: 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. 🐾