



**American Association
of Equine Practitioners**

Horse Health Education

THE OVERWEIGHT HORSE

Special Care & Nutrition

www.aaep.org/horseowner



HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: THE OVERWEIGHT HORSE



Feeding is one of the most rewarding chores of horse ownership.

However, many horses, given the opportunity, will eat far more than they need, tipping the scale into an unhealthy balance.





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No matter how much your horse enjoys eating, you do a disservice by overfeeding.

Excess pounds put a strain on virtually every body system. A kinder strategy is to supply food and exercise in proper amounts to keep your horse fit and healthy.



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Maintaining the ideal weight is not always easy.

Some horses are what we call “easy keepers,” meaning they require minimal calories to maintain optimal body condition.



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Ponies, in particular, seem to store excess energy as fat.

Many adult horses, especially those in the middle years, begin to retain unneeded weight due to reduced activity and a slow-down in metabolism.

When weight gain becomes extreme, we classify the horse as obese.



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HAZARDS OF OBESITY

Excess weight and over-nutrition have a number of potentially negative effects, including:

- Increased stress on the heart and lungs.
- Greater risk of laminitis or founder.
- Increased risk of developmental orthopedic (bone and joint) problems in young, growing horses.



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HAZARDS OF OBESITY

- More strain on joints, feet and limbs.
- Worsened symptoms of arthritis.
- Less efficient cooling of body temperatures.



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HAZARDS OF OBESITY

- Fat build-up around key organs, which interferes with normal function.
- Reduced reproductive efficiency.
- Greater lethargy and less resistance to fatigue.



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EVALUATING BODY CONDITION



When it comes to a horse's ideal body condition, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

For example, a competitive endurance horse is usually leaner than a show-fit halter horse.



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EVALUATING BODY CONDITION

Because “fitness” is subjective, equine health care professionals utilize a Body Condition Scoring system to speak in relative terms.



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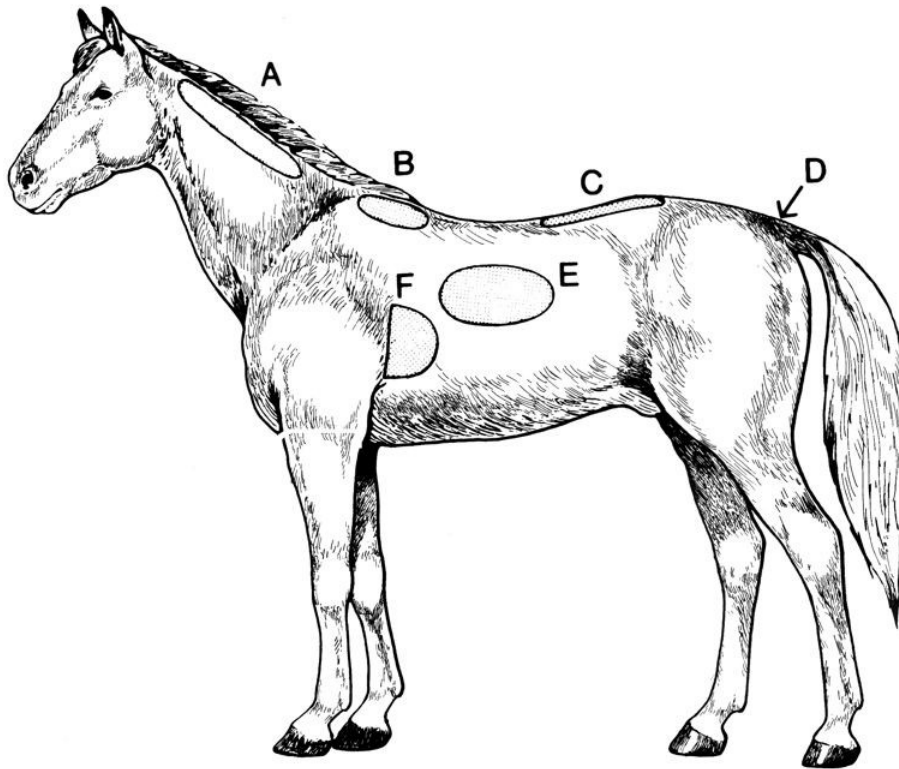
EVALUATING BODY CONDITION

The horse's physical condition is rated on visual appraisal and palpation of six key conformation points.

Scores range from 1 to 9, from “Poor” to “Extremely Fat.”



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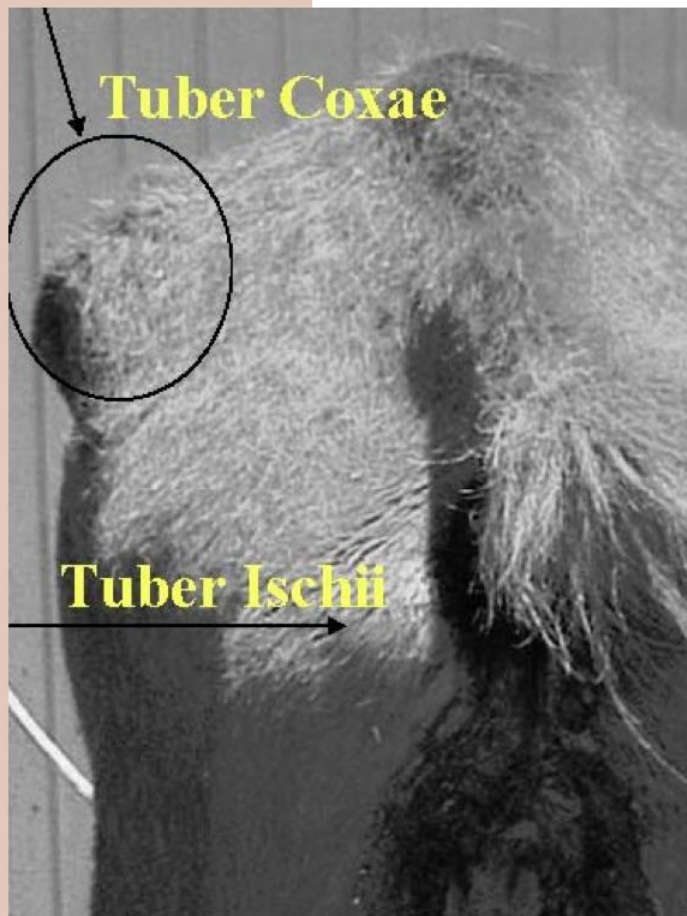


- A - the amount of flesh or fat covering along the neck
- B - the withers
- C - down the crease of the back
- D - at the tailhead
- E - ribs
- F - behind the shoulder

Scores range from 1 to 9, from
“Poor” to “Extremely Fat.”



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CONDITION SCORES

Score of 1 - Poor: The horse is emaciated. The spinous process (backbone), ribs and tailhead all project prominently. The bone structures of the withers, shoulders and neck are easily noticeable, and no fat can be felt anywhere.





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CONDITION SCORES



Score of 2 - Very Thin: The spinous processes are prominent. The ribs, tailhead and pelvic bones stand out; bone structures of the withers, neck and shoulders are faintly discernable.



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CONDITION SCORES

Score of 3 - Thin: The spinous processes stand out, but fat covers them to midpoint. Very slight fat cover can be felt over the ribs, but the spinous processes and ribs are easily discernable. The tailhead is prominent, but individual vertebrae cannot be seen. The tuber coxae bones are visible, but appear rounded. The tuber ischii bones cannot be seen. The withers, shoulders and neck are accentuated.



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CONDITION SCORES



Score of 4 - Moderately Thin:

The horse has a negative crease along its back, and the outline of the ribs can just be seen. Fat can be felt along the tailhead. The tuber coxae and tuber ischii bones cannot be seen, and the withers, neck and shoulders do not look obviously thin.



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CONDITION SCORES



Score of 5 - Moderate: The back is level. Ribs are not visually distinguishable, but easily felt. Fat around the tailhead feels slightly spongy. The withers look rounded, and the shoulder and neck blend smoothly into the body.



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CONDITION SCORES



Score of 6 - Moderately Fleshy:
There may be a slight crease down the back. Fat around the tailhead feels soft, and fat over the ribs feels spongy. There are small deposits along the sides of the withers, behind the shoulders and along the sides of the neck.



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CONDITION SCORES



Score of 7 - Fleshy: There may be a crease down the back. Individual ribs can be felt, but there is noticeable fat between the ribs. Fat around the tailhead is soft. Fat is noticeable in the withers, the neck and behind the shoulders.



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CONDITION SCORES

Score of 8 - Fat: The horse has a crease down the back. Spaces between ribs are so filled with fat that the ribs are difficult to feel. The area along the withers is filled with fat, and fat around the tailhead feels very soft. The space behind the shoulders is filled in flush, and some fat is deposited along the inner buttocks.





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CONDITION SCORES

Score of 9 - Extremely Fat: The crease down the back is very obvious. Fat appears in patches over the ribs, and there is bulging fat around the tailhead, withers, shoulders and neck. Fat along the inner buttocks may cause buttocks to rub together, and the flank is filled in flush.





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WHAT'S IDEAL

For most horses, body condition scores in the “Moderate” to “Moderate Fleshy” range, (scores 5 to 6) are ideal.



Keep in mind that the job of your particular athlete also has a bearing on what weight is appropriate for maximum performance.



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WHAT'S IDEAL

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.





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WHAT'S IDEAL

By feeding a horse to a level of 8, you are starting to push the limits of good health. Horses with scores of 8 or 9 are definite candidates for a weight reduction plan.



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WEIGHT REDUCTION



You hold the keys to controlling your horse's weight.

Dedication to a regular exercise program and restraint when measuring the feeding ration will need to be enforced for a sound nutrition program.



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WEIGHT REDUCTION

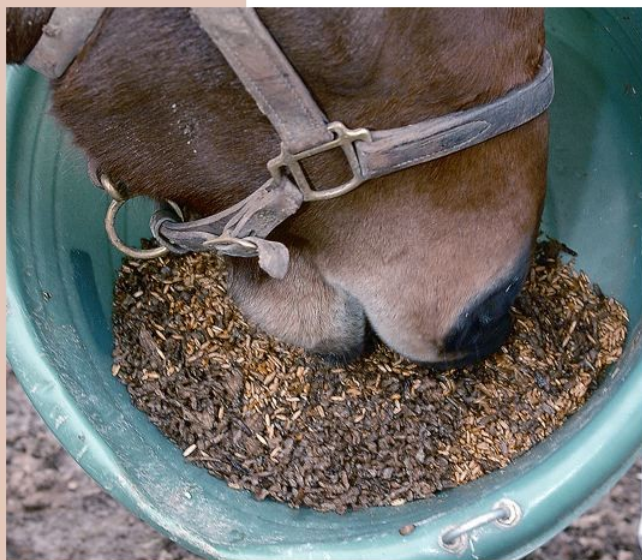


By increasing the amount of exercise, you can “rev-up” the horse’s metabolic engine and burn more calories. By shifting to a lower-calorie diet, you can create an energy deficit so that the horse begins to utilize its fat reserves as fuel.



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WEIGHT REDUCTION



Even though the ration provides fewer calories, it should be balanced so that it continues to provide all the essential nutrients.

Develop a program that will allow your horse to reduce its weight without any negative side effects.



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WEIGHT REDUCTION

Here are some guidelines to get you started:

- Be patient. Weight reduction should be a slow, steady process that does not stress the horse or create metabolic upsets.
- Make changes in both the type and amount of feed gradually. Reduce rations by no more than 10 percent over a 7 to 10-day period.



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WEIGHT REDUCTION

- Provide plenty of clean, fresh water so the horse's digestive and other systems function as efficiently as possible and rid the body of metabolic and other wastes.
- Select feeds that provide plenty of high-quality fiber but are low in total energy.

Note: Remember to measure feed by weight, not volume, to determine the appropriate ration.



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WEIGHT REDUCTION



- Track your horse's progress using a weight tape. When the horse's weight plateaus, gradually cut back its ration again.
- Step up the horse's exercise regimen. Gradually build time and intensity as the horse's fitness improves. Some horses are natural pasture potatoes. Ride, lunge, drive or work the horse on a treadmill rather than rely on free-choice exercise.



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WEIGHT REDUCTION



- Select feeds that are lower in fat since fat is an energy-dense nutrient source.
- Switch or reduce the amount of alfalfa hay fed. Replace with a mature grass or oat hay to reduce caloric intake. This will also satisfy the horse's need to chew, reduce boredom and provide fill for its stomach.

Note: Your county extension agent can analyze your pasture nutrient content and/or take core samples of your hay to evaluate nutrient, vitamin and mineral densities.



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WEIGHT REDUCTION

- Feed separate from other horses so the overweight horse does not have the opportunity to eat his portion and his neighbor's too. In extreme cases of obesity, caloric intake may also need to be controlled by limiting pasture intake.
- Balance the horse's diet based on age and activity level. Make sure the horse's vitamin, mineral and protein requirements are met. A supplement may need to be added to the ration to compensate for the lower quality, less nutrient-dense feeds.



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HELP FOR HAY BELLIES



A “hay belly” may or may not be associated with true obesity.

Many horses, especially the very young and old, may exhibit hay bellies without an associated build-up of body fat.



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HELP FOR HAY BELLIES

Hay bellies are a distention of the abdominal area due to the volume of grass or hay the animal consumes. The belly expands to handle the load.



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HELP FOR HAY BELLIES

To eliminate a hay belly, reduce the total volume of feed that passes through the system.

A well-balanced, complete feed may be a good way to reduce total volume without adversely affecting the amount of fiber and nutrients required for proper digestion and nutrition.

Many apparent hay bellies, especially in younger horses, may be the result of parasitism. Consult with your equine veterinarian regarding your deworming program.



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MAINTAINING PROPER WEIGHT



Once your horse has reached its ideal body condition, maintaining the proper weight is a gentle balancing act. You will probably need to readjust your horse's ration to stabilize its weight.





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MAINTAINING PROPER WEIGHT



Exercise will continue to be a key component in keeping the horse fit.

Because obesity can affect a horse's health, keep a good line of communication with your equine veterinarian. Schedule regular check-ups, especially during the weight reduction process.



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Photos courtesy of

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www.equineU.com

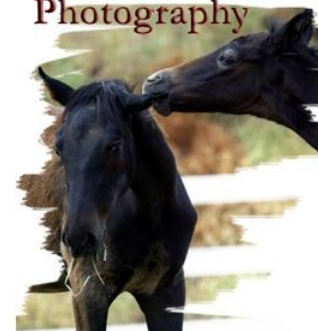
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YOUR GUIDE TO EQUINE HEALTH CARE



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