

Equine Body Condition Scoring Training Manual

Developed by Equine Guelph, University of Guelph

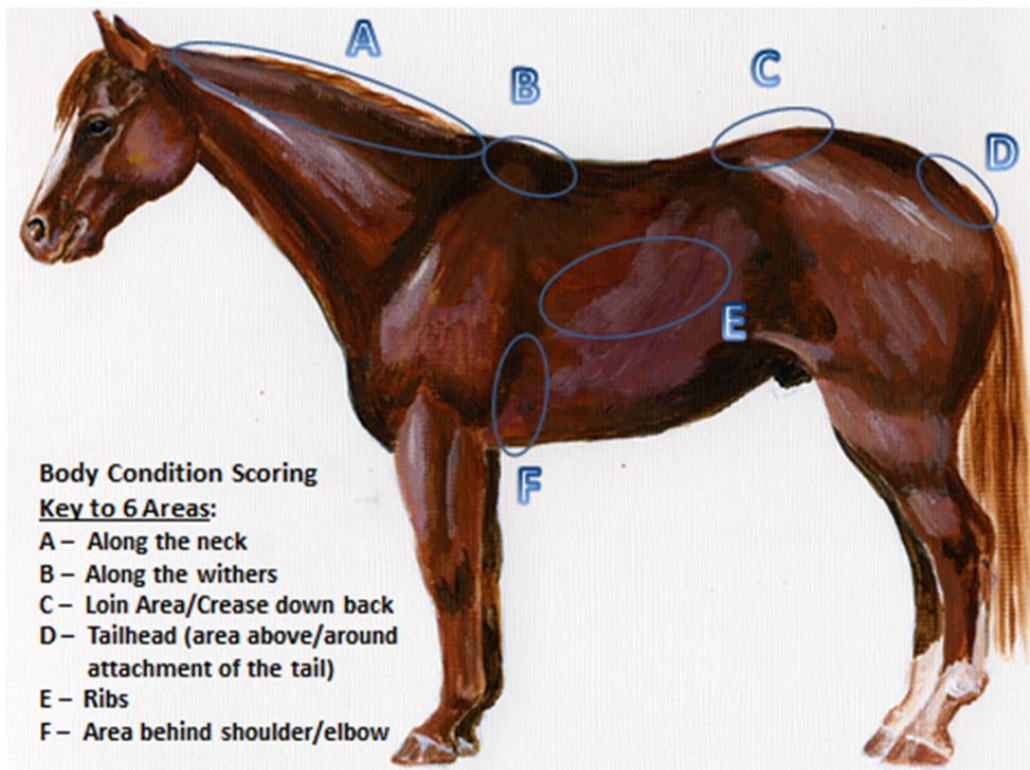


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Introduction

Body Condition Scoring (BCS) is an important tool for monitoring the condition of horses in order to assess changes and to adjust nutritional management and exercise protocols in order to maintain ideal condition for the horse. By studying and applying this tool, you will achieve consistency in applying the Body Condition Score method developed by Dr. Henneke, a scientifically-developed method that uses 6 areas on the horse to score fat coverage. The 6 areas to be palpated, as shown, are to be assessed individually and scored (Note: there can be a range of scores as each horse will not score the same score on all six areas), then the scores for all 6 areas are to be added up and divided by 6 to get the final BCS. Record keeping of the individual scores and the total score for each horse over time is the basis for an efficient and highly useful management strategy.

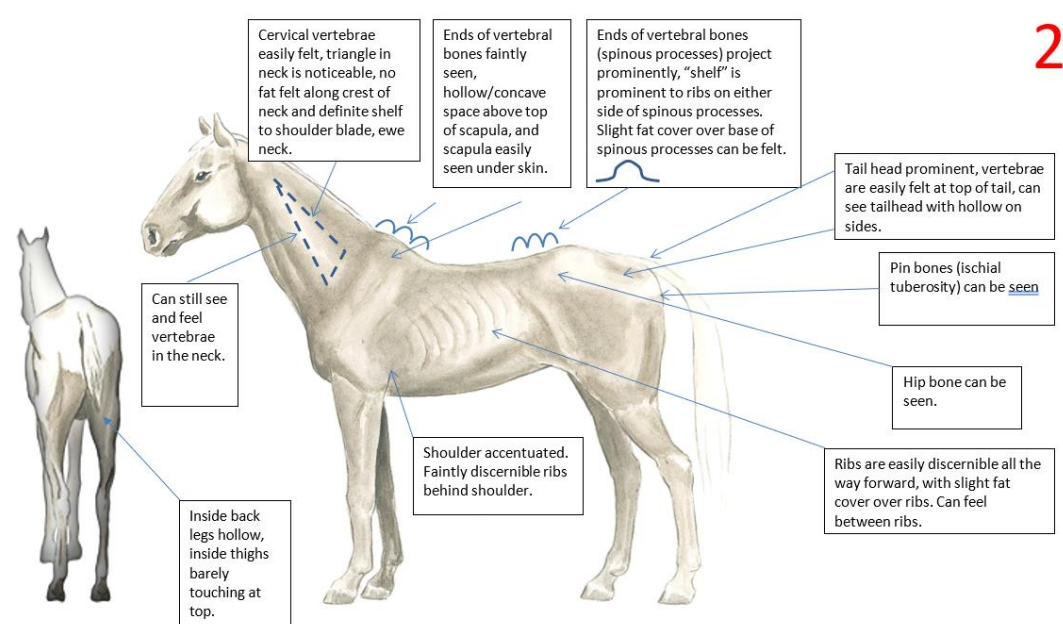
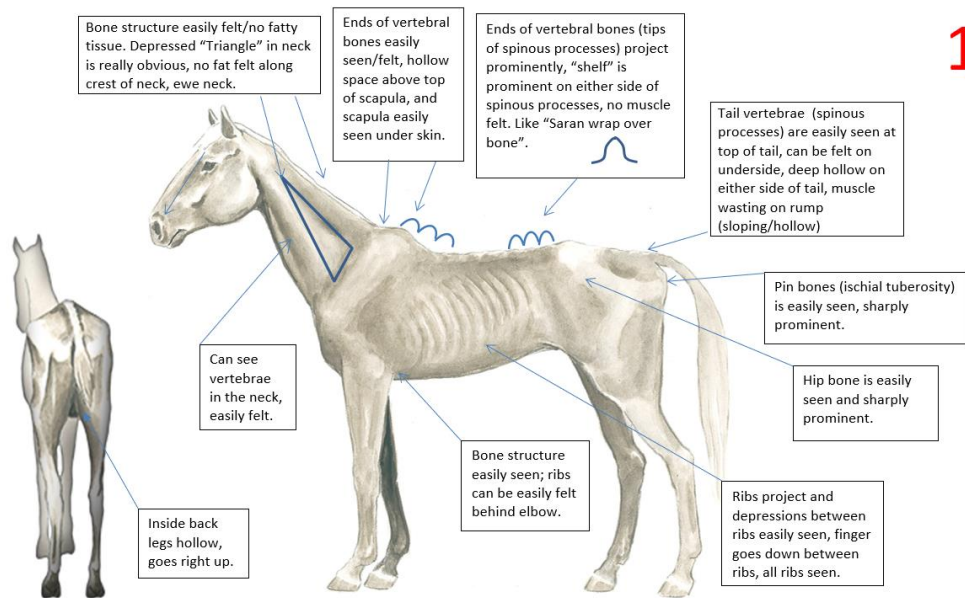
This resource has been developed as a teaching tool but also as an effective monitoring tool to maintain consistency on each horse over time as well as between horses. There are 9 categories for BCS and you will notice that the score is coloured to represent the condition, as shown with the StopLight System below.



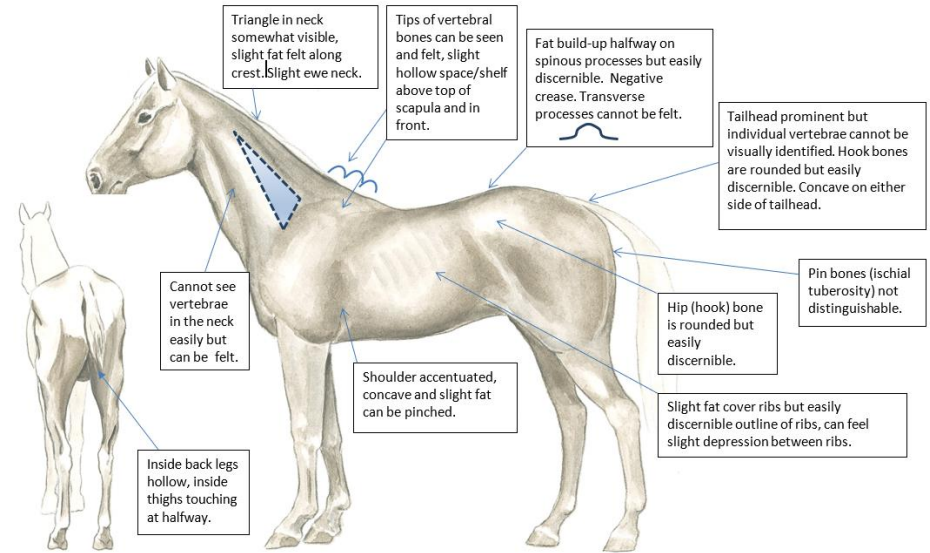
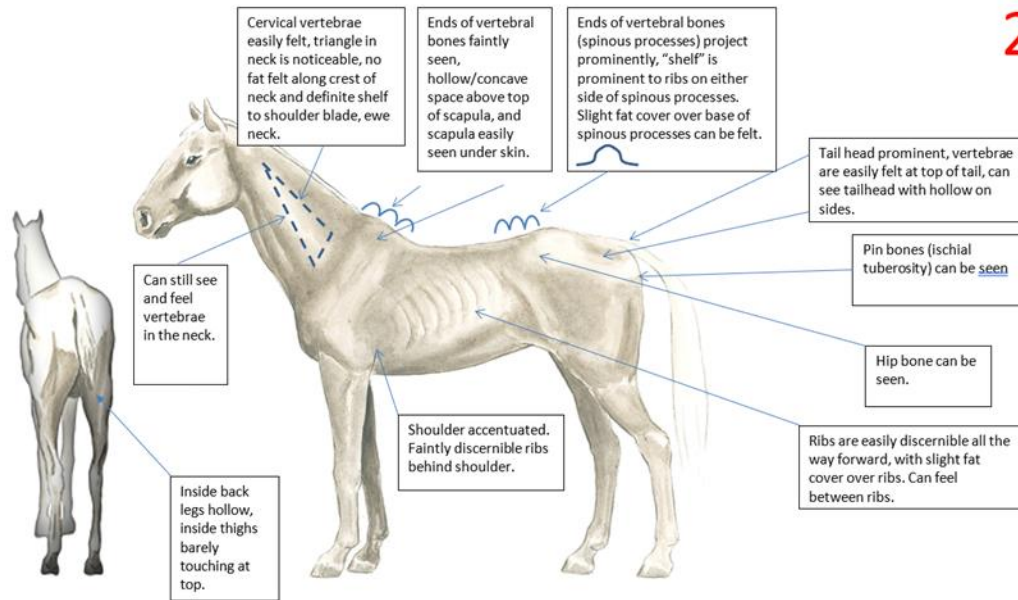
Body Condition Scores of 1-2 and 8-9 are in the category of “requires intervention”. Scores of 1-2 are in critical condition and 8-9 is high risk.

Body Condition Scores of 3 and 7 are in the category of “requires intervention”.

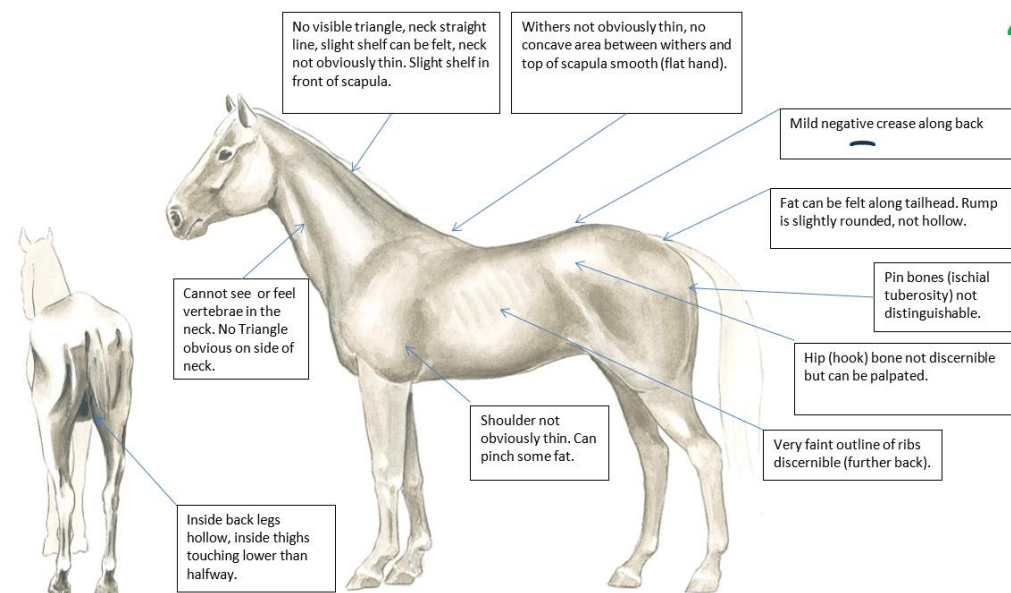
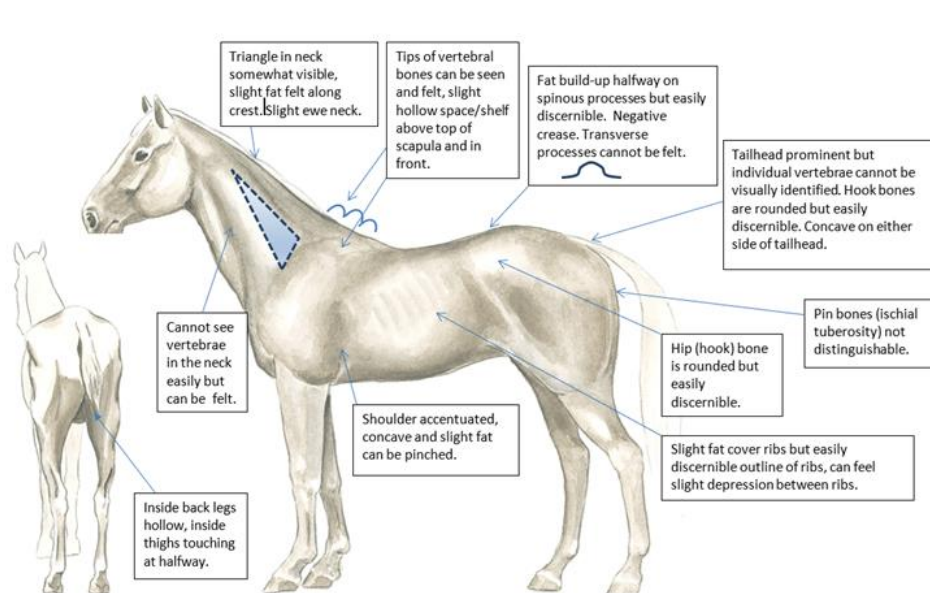
Body Condition Scores of 4-6 are in the acceptable categories do not require intervention.



Condition	Neck	Withers	Loin	Tailhead	Ribs	Shoulder
1 Poor	Bone structure easily noticeable, animal extremely emaciated, no fatty tissue can be felt	Bone structure easily noticeable	Spinous processes project prominently	Tailhead (pinbone) and hook bones project prominently	Ribs projecting prominently	Bone structure easily noticeable
2 Very Thin	Faintly discernible, animal emaciated	Faintly discernible	Slight fat covering over base of spinous processes. Transverse processes of lumbar vertebrae feel rounded. Spinous processes are prominent	Tailhead prominent, can feel vertebrae in tail	Slight fat cover over ribs. Ribs easily discernible	Shoulder accentuated

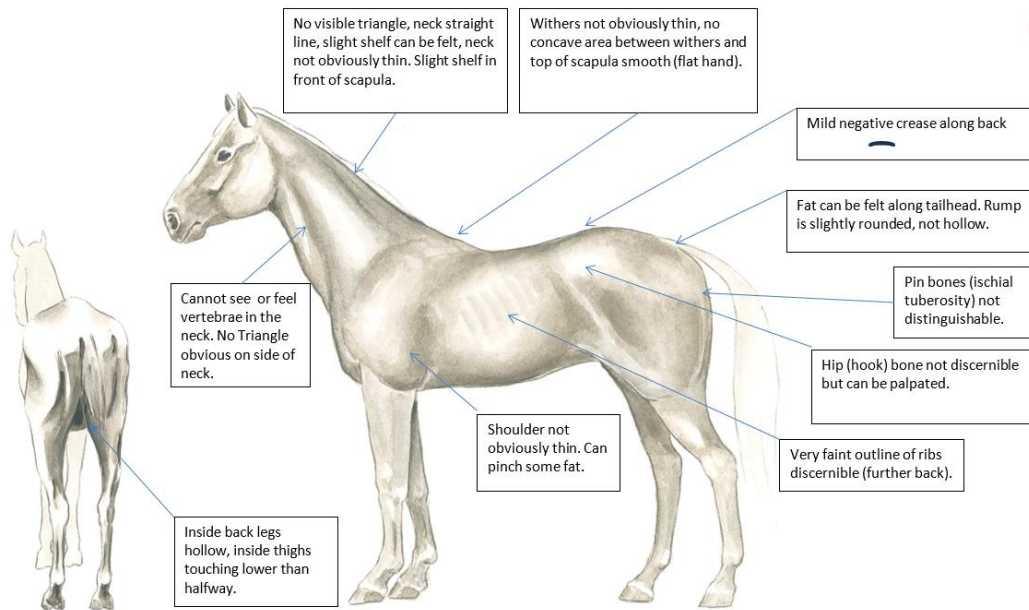


Condition	Neck	Withers	Loin	Tailhead	Ribs	Shoulder
2 Very Thin	Cervical vertebrae easily felt/faintly discernible, animal emaciated	Faintly discernible, concave above top of scapula	Slight fat covering over base of spinous processes. Transverse processes of lumbar vertebrae feel rounded. Spinous processes are prominent.	Tailhead prominent, can feel vertebrae in tail	Slight fat cover over ribs. Ribs easily discernible.	Shoulder accentuated
3 Thin	Neck accentuated	Withers accentuated	Fat buildup halfway on spinous processes but easily discernible. Transverse processes cannot be felt.	Tailhead prominent but individual vertebrae cannot be visually identified. Hook bones appear rounded but are still easily discernible. Pin bones not distinguishable.	Slight fat cover over ribs. Individual ribs easily discernible and palpable	Shoulder accentuated

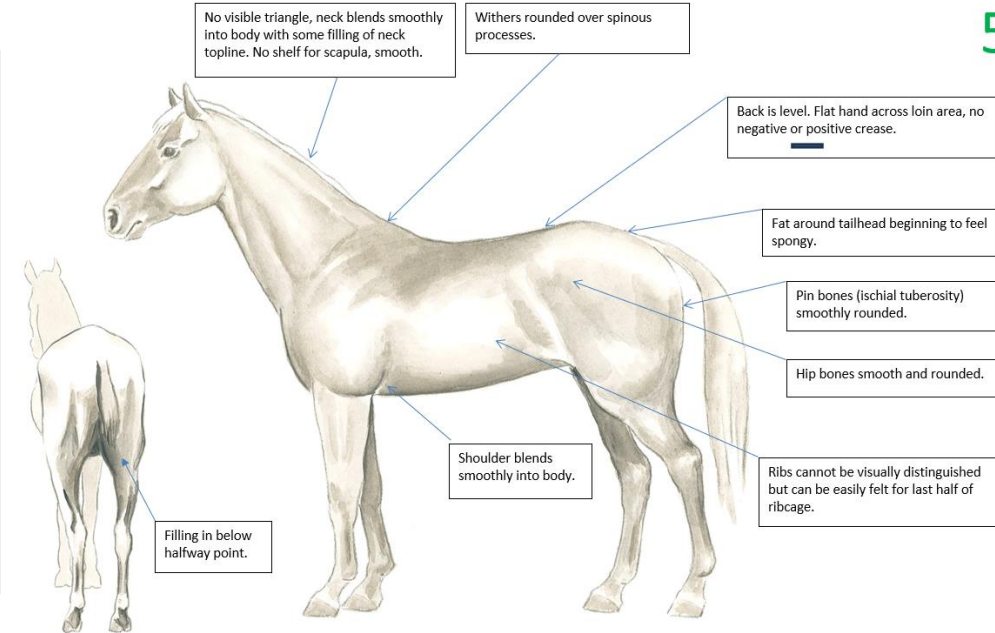


Condition	Neck	Withers	Loin	Tailhead	Ribs	Shoulder
3 Thin	Neck accentuated	Withers accentuated, can see tips of vertebrae	Fat buildup halfway on spinous processes but easily discernible. Transverse processes cannot be felt.	Tailhead prominent, individual vertebrae cannot be visually identified. Hook bones appear rounded but are still easily discernible. Pin bones not distinguishable.	Slight fat cover over ribs. Ribs easily discernible visually and a bit through fingers	Shoulder accentuated, concave with slight fat pinch.
4 Moderately Thin	Neck not obviously thin. Neck is straight line from withers to bottom of ears, no triangle in neck	Withers not obviously thin, flat hand over top of scapula	Mild negative crease along back	Prominence depends on conformation; fat can be felt. Hook bones not discernible.	Faint outline discernible	Shoulder not obviously thin

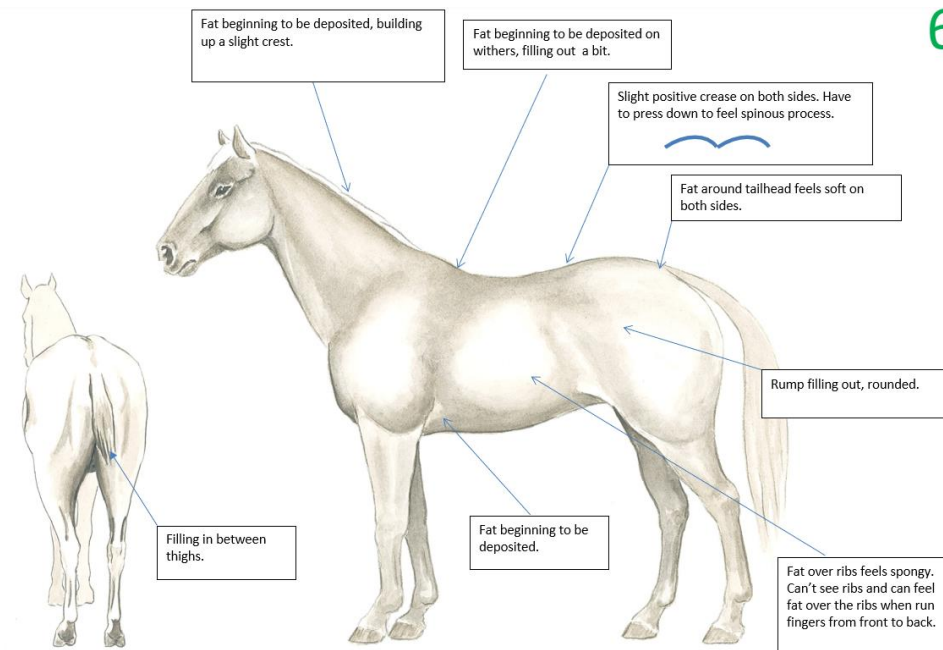
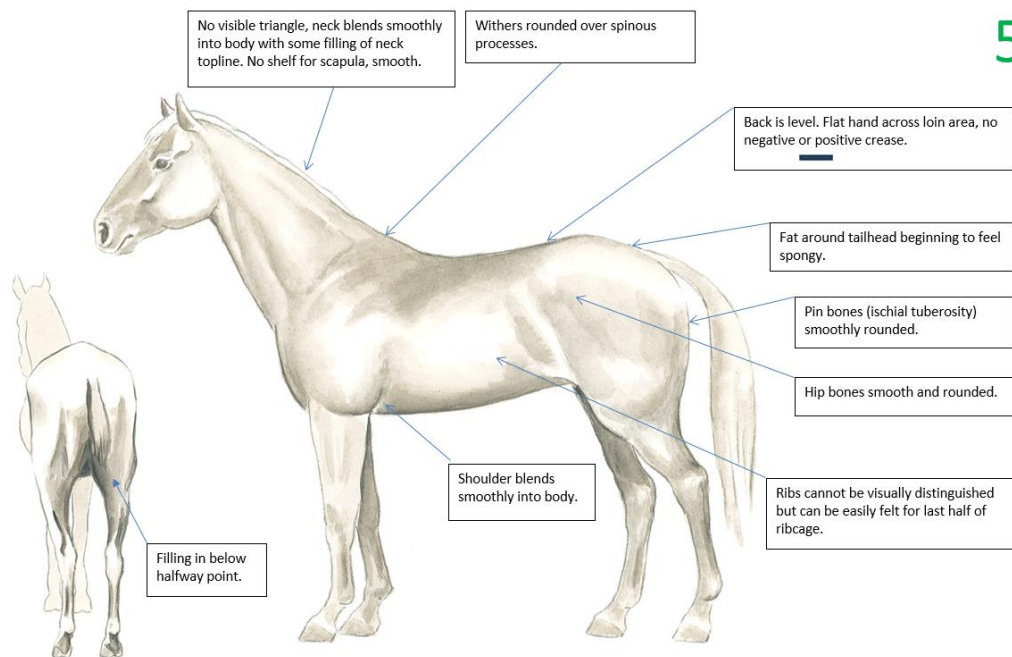
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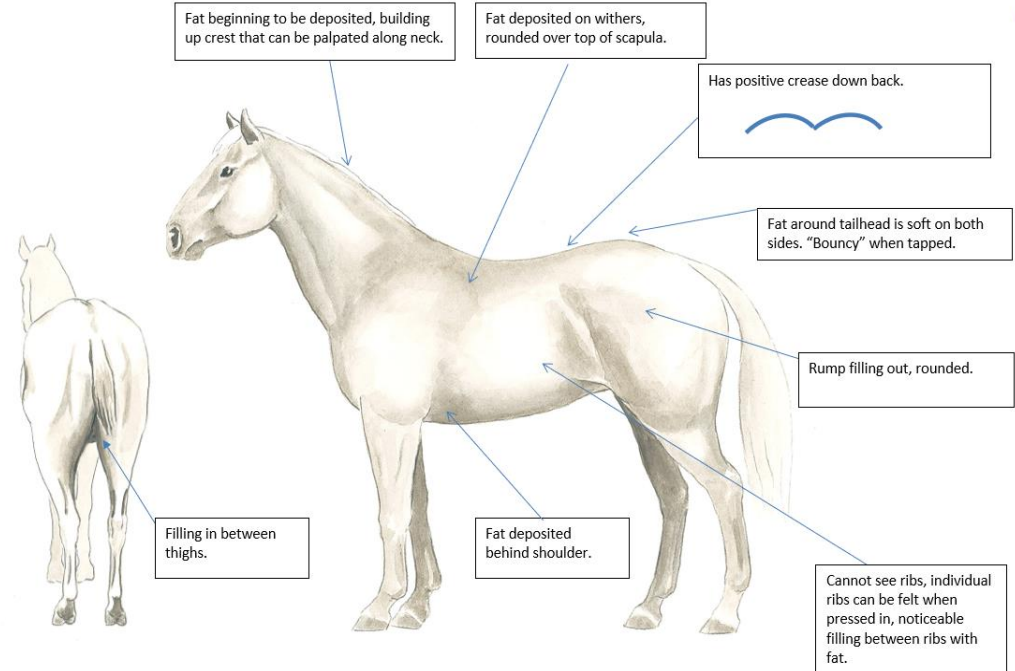
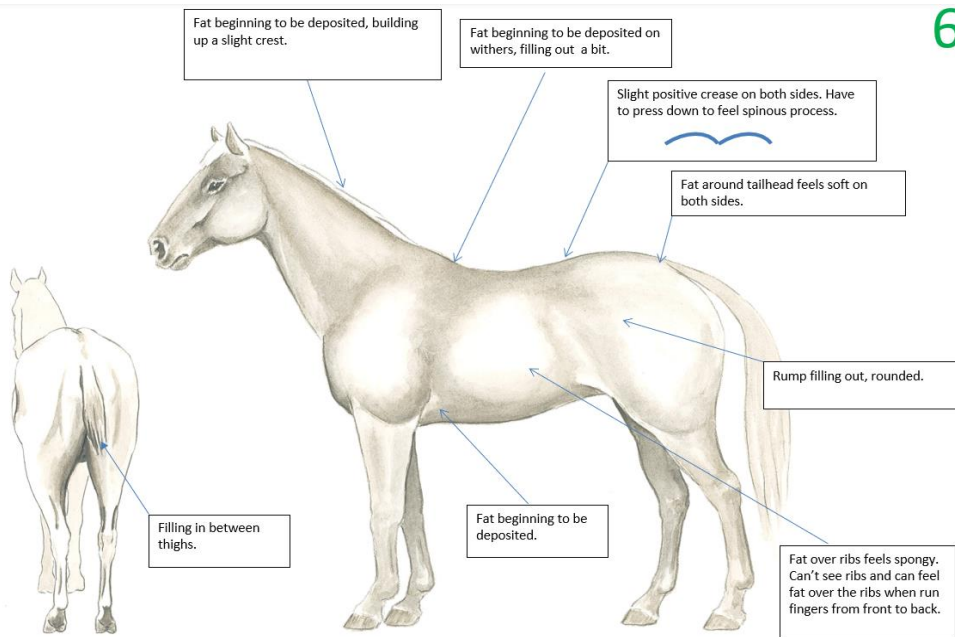
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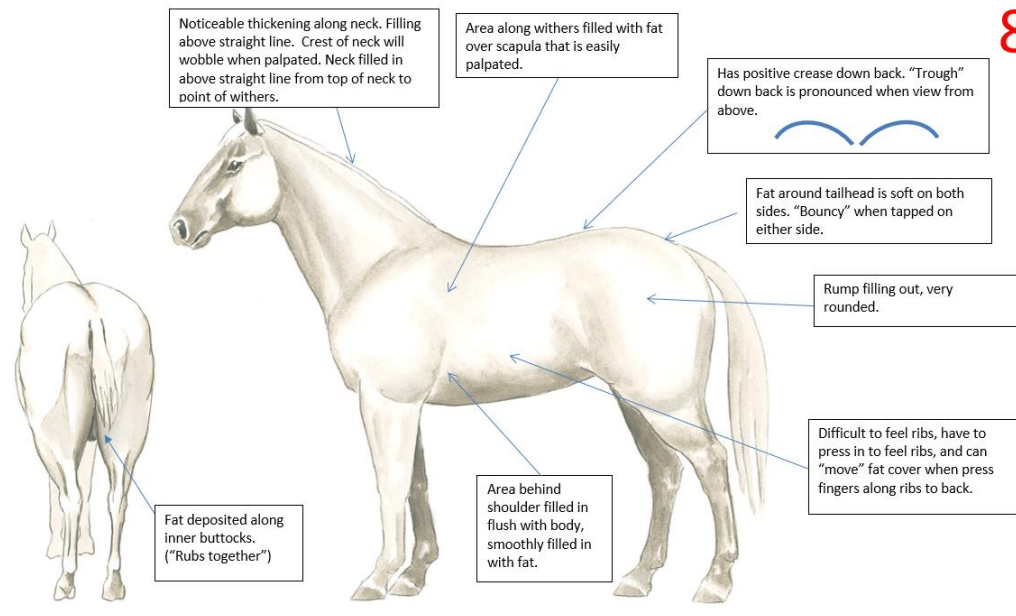
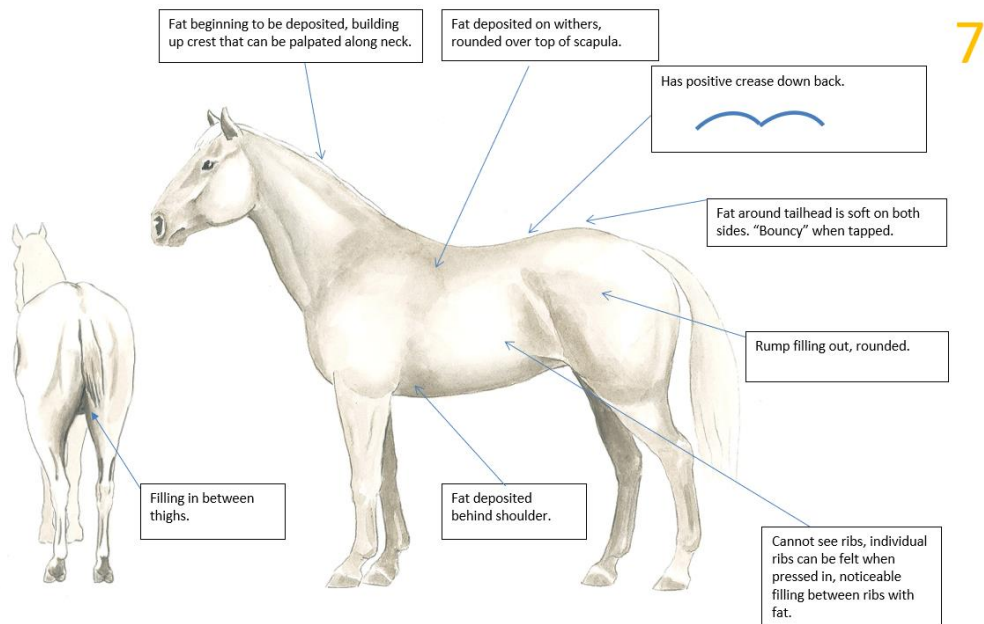
Condition	Neck	Withers	Loin	Tailhead	Ribs	Shoulder
4 Moderately Thin	Neck not obviously thin (no triangle on neck)	Withers not obviously thin	Negative crease along back	Prominence depends on conformation; fat can be felt. Hook bones not discernible.	Faint outline discernible	Shoulder not obviously thin
5 Moderate	Neck blends smoothly into body	Withers rounded over spinous processes	Back level	Fat around tailhead beginning to feel spongy	Ribs cannot be visually distinguished but can be easily felt	Shoulder blends smoothly into body



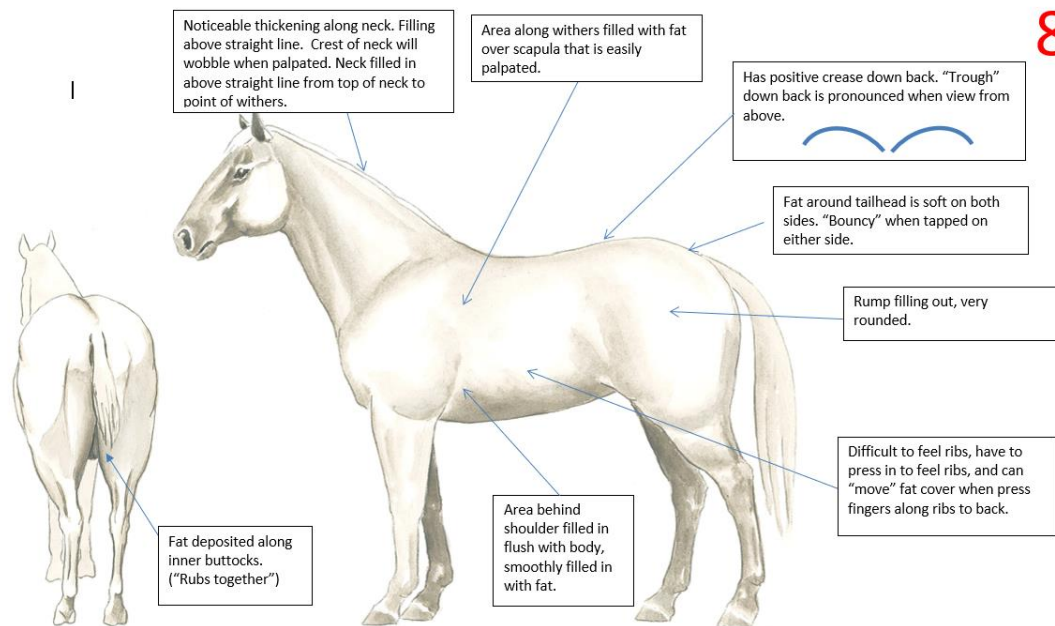
Condition	Neck	Withers	Loin	Tailhead	Ribs	Shoulder
5 Moderate	Neck blends smoothly into body	Withers rounded over spinous processes	Back level	Fat around tailhead beginning to feel spongy	Ribs cannot be visually distinguished but can be easily felt	Shoulder blends smoothly into body
6 Moderately Fleshy	Fat beginning to be deposited	Fat beginning to be deposited	May have slight positive crease down back (may have to press down a bit to feel spinous processes)	Fat around tailhead feels soft	Fat over ribs feels spongy	Fat beginning to be deposited (can pinch fat)



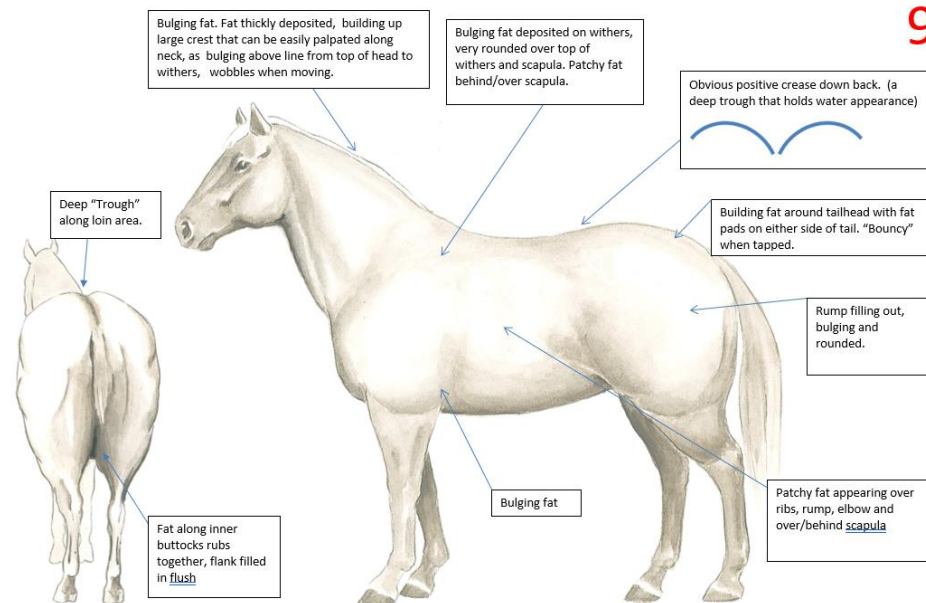
Condition	Neck	Withers	Loin	Tailhead	Ribs	Shoulder
6 Moderately Fleshy	Fat beginning to be deposited	Fat beginning to be deposited	May have slight positive crease down back	Fat around tailhead feels soft	Fat over ribs feels spongy	Fat beginning to be deposited
7 Fleshy	Fat deposited along neck	Fat deposited along withers	May have positive crease down back	Fat around tailhead is soft ("bouncy" on both sides if tapped)	Individual ribs can be felt, but noticeable filling between ribs with fat (when press fingers in)	Fat deposited behind shoulder (can easily pinch fat, cannot feel ribs under elbow)



Condition	Neck	Withers	Loin	Tailhead	Ribs	Shoulder
7 Fleshy	Fat deposited along neck	Fat deposited along withers	May have positive crease down back	Fat around tailhead is soft	Individual ribs can be felt, but noticeable filling between ribs with fat	Fat deposited behind shoulder
8 Fat	Noticeable thickening of neck, fat deposited along inner buttocks	Area along withers filled with fat (filling in over withers)	Positive crease down back ("trough" is pronounced)	Tailhead fat very soft (very "bouncy")	Difficult to feel ribs (have to press in to feel ribs all the way, can "move" fat cover	Area behind shoulder filled in flush with body



8



9

Condition	Neck	Withers	Loin	Tailhead	Ribs	Shoulder
8 Fat	Noticeable thickening of neck, fat deposited along inner buttocks	Area along withers filled with fat	Positive crease down back	Tailhead fat very soft	Difficult to feel ribs	Area behind shoulder filled in flush with body
9 Extremely Fat	Bulging fat along neck (wobbly or hard). Fat along inner buttocks may rub together. Flank filled in flush	Bulging fat (fat patches along/behind scapula)	Obvious positive crease down back (trough along back "holds water")	Building fat around tailhead (fat pads on either side of rump)	Patchy fat appearing over ribs	Bulging fat

Summary Notes on Body Condition Scores:

Horses in a body condition score of **1** are critical cases of prolonged starvation, neglect and/or disease. No fatty tissue can be felt on the body and all reserves have been used up. Immediate veterinary care is required to determine the next steps. It is highly likely that this horse is in immediate danger of dying. A horse in this condition should not be moved unless with consultation or supervision by a veterinarian. It will likely be very weak and lethargic.

A horse in a condition score of **2** is in serious shape, from long-term malnutrition, dehydration, disease and/or illness. The horse may be weak and lethargic. Immediate veterinary assistance is required. The horse should not be moved without veterinary supervision and support.

All ribs can be seen on a horse with a score of **3**. Veterinary consultation is required for a horse in a condition score of 3. Stallions may drop to a score of 3 by the end of the breeding season if not carefully managed, and below 3 there will be impairment of the reproductive capacity. Horses on winter pasture will lose condition and they have not enough reserves to maintain body temperature. Mares with nursing foal can drop weight quickly to serious BCS due to drain on body reserves on mare from lactation.

Horses that are **4** or less if not working may have varying degrees of malnutrition. Broodmares at **4** or less will have problems with reproduction and producing adequate milk, and if lactating will quickly lose more weight with a nursing foal at side. Horses in race training or endurance competition may be in this range, as they are fit and muscled but will not have much fat on the body due to the training schedule and will not be able to thermoregulate as effectively in the winter or in cold/rainy conditions.

A score of **5** is the ideal BCS for most horses, including broodmares and stallions and most performance horses. It is the ideal condition for general riding horses and pleasure horses.

Breeding stallions can be at a **6-7** at the start of the breeding season as they generally lose weight over the season for a busy season. Horses on pasture turnout over the winter may start at a score of **6** or **7** as there may be loss over the winter depending on access to feed/forage. This is the ideal for mares going into the breeding season.

A score of **7** is adequate condition for mares going into the foaling season, as they will lose condition with foaling and nursing. Horses in work should not be at this level as it imposes more stress on the supportive tissues and thermoregulation in the heat becomes more challenging, particularly with heat/humidity and for heavier-bodied breeds.

The ribs on a horse at a BCS of **8** are difficult to feel and the crease down the back is easily viewed (think of it having the ability to “hold water”). Inner thighs are rubbing together. Broodmares should not be allowed to reach this score as this is unhealthy for the mare and increases joint and skeletal stress due to the added weight on top of the foal weight. Breeding performance for the stallion can be compromised at **8** or higher. This puts a great deal of stress on the locomotor structures and predisposes a horse to lameness as well as greater heat stress.

A horse in a BCS of **9** is at very high risk of disease, laminitis, injury and thermoregulatory issues in the summer heat/humidity. The crease down the back will actually “hold” water (frequently resulting in “rain rot” in the skin) and the inner thighs are pressed together when standing square. This is the result of little or no exercise and extreme overfeeding of calories. A horse in this condition is predisposed to many health risks from the extreme obesity.