

Body Condition Score: Too Fat

Don't settle for anything less than Ideal: Consequences of being Too Fat

23% - 51% of horses are reported to be overweight or obese¹⁻⁵. Since owners can sometimes underestimate a horse's body condition score^{4,5}, obesity rates may be even higher. Obesity is associated with many negative health consequences. Take a preventive stance against obesity by reviewing the Henneke Body Condition Score⁶ (BCS) system, and using it on a regular basis. Equine Guelph has developed [a barn poster](#) to help horse owners keep accurate track of their horse's BCS.

What is an overweight or obese horse?

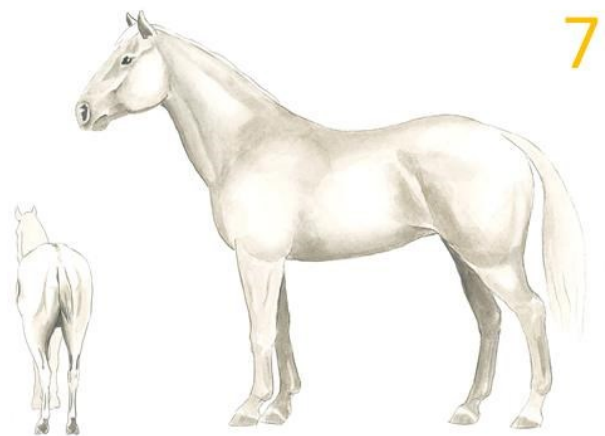
- Overweight and obese horses are those with body condition scores of greater than 7 on the Henneke BCS system
- A score of 7 may be too high for some horses (e.g. athletic horses), but acceptable for others (e.g. a broodmare going into winter)

Risk Factors

- Certain breeds, such as pony breeds⁵
- Overfeeding
- Primary use⁷
 - ◊ Pleasure riding or non-ridden horses are more likely to be obese than competition horses
- Easy keepers⁷
- Summer season⁸
- Dominant position in the herd⁹
- Over-blanketing

Consequences

- Exercise intolerance
 - ◊ Longer post-exercise recovery time
- Less effective at thermoregulation
- Decreased reproductive performance
 - ◊ Altered estrous cycles
 - ◊ changes to the follicle and oocyte¹¹
 - ◊ Problems with follicle development and oocyte release
- Benign lipomas, which can cause obstructions in the digestive tract
- Increased production of inflammatory molecules in the body

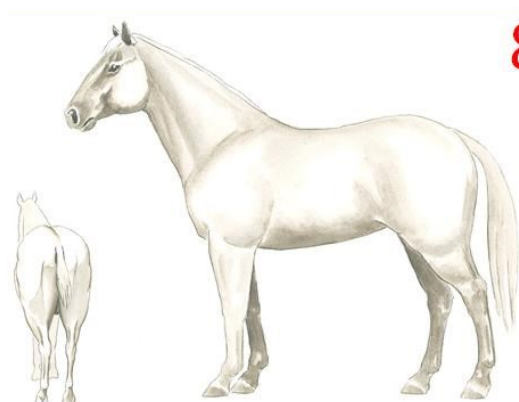


Body condition score of 7

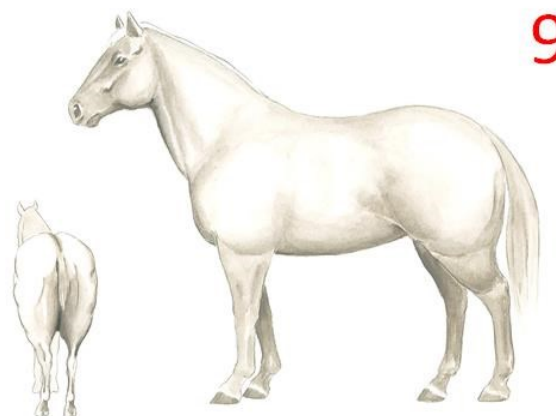
- Altered metabolism¹² (e.g. insulin resistance), resulting in increased risk of:
 - ◊ Equine Metabolic Syndrome
 - ◊ Laminitis
 - ◊ Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction
 - ◊ Osteoarthritis and osteochondrosis
 - ◊ Hyperlipidemia and hepatic lipidosis
 - ◊ Diabetes mellitus
 - ◊ Systemic inflammation

Management tips

- Schedule a veterinary visit to address any underlying causes
- Consult with veterinarian and/or equine nutritionist to develop a weight loss plan, which may involve restricting feed intake (especially through pasture) and/or eliminating concentrate feed the horse is receiving
- Reducing weight by starvation is not viable or lawful. Consequences are dire.
- Provide free access to water and loose salt. A good quality forage balancer is essential when restricting feed.
- Increase the amount of exercise
- Prevent boredom between meals by:
 - ◊ Hay nets and slow feeders to increase time spent foraging
 - ◊ Divide forage in piles to encourage movement
 - ◊ Provide a play ball with a small handful of high-fibre pellets between feedings. This feed should be included as part of the horse's calculated feed allowance for the day.



Body condition score of 8.
A score of 8 or 9 requires intervention.



Body condition score of 9.
A score of 8 or 9 requires intervention.

Learn more about improving horse welfare by taking Equine Guelph's [Horse Care & Welfare](#) short course, or deepen your understanding with our 12-week courses on [Equine Welfare](#) or [Equine Nutrition](#)!

Artwork courtesy of Ruth Benns.

Sources:

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