

How to know
if your horse is...



WorldHorseWelfare

...the *Right Weight*



Visit www.worldhorsewelfare.org
or scan the QR code to find out more

Why is the right weight so important?

Most of us realise why it's important for horses not to be underweight, but did you know that an overweight horse risks serious, long-term health problems? These include heart and lung conditions, problems with joints and limbs, and laminitis.

Laminitis is a common condition, meaning it is easy to underestimate its severity.

There are many triggers, but excess weight is one of the most frequent – it is also one that horse owners really can do something about.

The condition isn't restricted to native ponies during the spring and summer months – it can, and does, affect all types of horse and pony throughout the year.

A horse's hoof wall is attached to the bones within the foot by finger-like structures called laminae. In laminitis sufferers, this structure starts to separate, causing the bone inside the hoof to drop.

In the worst cases, the bone can drop through the sole of the foot. Laminitis is an incredibly painful condition, which must always be treated as an emergency

However, by regularly monitoring and controlling your horse's condition you should be able to avoid weight-induced laminitis completely.

For more information please speak to your vet.



You can find more information about laminitis on our website



Image © AHT



Dollar

Case study: the two extremes

Dollar is a 14hh gelding. In the first picture (top left), he was extremely overweight and suffering from laminitis and intermittent lameness. Nine months later, Dollar had lost more than 28 stone in weight. Imagine the extra strain this had been putting on his body; he looks like a different horse (bottom left). Once he'd lost the excess, his laminitis was under control and he was sound.

Bahir is another 14hh gelding. When he arrived with us, (top right) he was 28 stone underweight – the same amount under as Dollar was over. This wasn't due to any underlying problems – simply a lack of food. It took three months to get Bahir to the right weight – a third of the time it took for Dollar, and he didn't suffer any long-term effects. Horses like Dollar, however, will always be prone to laminitis, even once they're in the correct condition, and their weight will need to be managed for the rest of their lives. Although we would never like to see an underweight horse, the long-term implications of a horse being overweight can be more serious.



Bahir



Watch our video on how to fat score your horse on our website

How to fat score your horse

You can assess your horse's condition by 'fat scoring' (also called body condition scoring).

You are only assessing the amount of fat a horse is carrying, not their muscle tone, coat condition, etc. In this way, the same system can be applied to everything from a non-ridden pony to a three-day-event horse. Have a look at the body fat guide over the page –

on this five-point system the ideal is between a two and a three, with the optimum score for most leisure horses being about three.

Horses are designed to lose weight over the winter months so that they can safely gain weight from the spring flush of grass, so please don't worry if your horse fluctuates between a two and a three throughout the year.

How to Fat Score

Watch our video on how to fat score your horse on our website now!

You can't effectively fat-score a horse just by looking – you need to feel for the fat cover in certain areas. Give your horse one score out of five for their neck and shoulder, one for their back/barrel and one for their hindquarters, then take an average. Horses store fat in different areas, so an average of these scores will produce a more accurate assessment, as well as highlighting potential danger areas.

Half scores are allowed e.g., 3.5/5 as some horses may have fat coverage between two scores.



1. Start on the top of your horses' neck

Feel along the top of your horse's neck – can you wobble the top of it (fat), or is it fairly firm (muscle)? It's important to note that a significant fatty crest can go solid, so make sure that isn't the cause of any firmness – fat is deposited along the top of the neck (the crest), whereas muscle develops in the middle-lower sections of the neck.

Feel if it is significantly thicker along the top of the neck (the crest) as you move down from the poll towards the withers, as this is likely to be a buildup of fat.



2. Move down the neck and onto their shoulder

Run your hand down your horse's neck and onto their shoulder. If fat has built up in front of the shoulder blades, your hand will run from the neck to the shoulder without the shoulder blade 'stopping' your hand. Look at the body fat guide and score your horse out of five for their neck and shoulder.



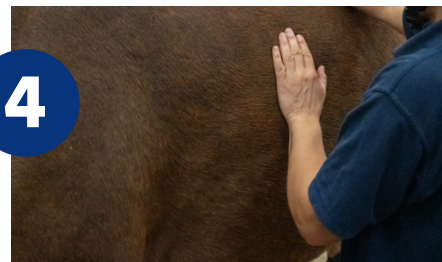
3. Feel across their back

Relax your hand, palm down, across your horse's back. Ideally, your hand should arch over the spine, making a sideways 'C' shape. When horses put weight on in this area, the fat builds up on either side of the spine, causing a flat hand.

Notes: In the UK, native breeds often store excess fat in 'pads' behind their shoulders, so keep an eye out for this and allow for it in the score you give.

Horses with hormonal disorders such as Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS) may also develop fat pads or pockets in areas that do not typically store fat.

Horses don't store much fat on their underbellies and 'hay bellies' are often mistaken as fat. Hay bellies are typically a full intestinal tract and should not be scored. Instead, imagine a horizontal line the same height as the point of the shoulder and score the horse purely on areas above that line.



4. Run your hand along your horse's barrel

Run your fingers along your horse's side. You should be able to feel their ribs fairly easily using moderate pressure.

Again, give your horse a score out of five for their back and middle.



5. Finish fat scoring on your horse's hindquarters

Feel for the hip bones and pelvis, and check for a buildup of fat around the base of the tail. Again, it should be possible to feel the structures of the skeleton using moderate pressure, and there should be no notable fat deposits around the base of the tail.

Give a score out of five for the hindquarters.

Once you have all three scores, add them together and divide by three to find your horse's average overall fat score. Use the chart on the back of this leaflet to keep a record.

Q: Is this fat that I'm feeling on my horse, or muscle?

A: A simple way to tell the difference is that fat is soft and wobbles, whereas muscle is harder and firm. Horses that are elderly or not in work naturally have less muscle mass and definition, so may look like they have a lower fat score even when they don't. This is why it is important to feel for fat cover, rather than just looking.



Watch our video on how to fat score your horse on our website
www.worldhorsewelfare.org/advice/weight-is-your-horse-the-right-weight

Averaging system designed by Dr Teresa Hollands BSc (Hons), MSc (Nutrition), PhD, R.Nutr

Neck/Shoulder Fat Scores



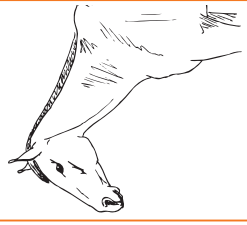
Not enough fat

The right amount of fat

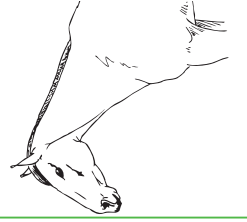
Too much fat



- Neck is very narrow, slack at base
- Prominent dip before wither – ewe necked
- Shoulder blades very prominent with no fat cover



- Neck is narrow, slack at base
- Slight dip before wither – ewe necked
- Shoulder blades prominent with little/no fat cover



- Neck narrow but firm
- Shoulder blade clearly defined



- Firm neck
- No crest (except stallions)
- Shoulder blades defined



- Slight crest on neck, wide and spongy
- Fat pad in front, behind or covering shoulder blades



- Marked crest, very wide and firm, creases of fat
- Shoulder blade buried and difficult to feel

Back/Barrel Fat Scores



Not enough fat

The right amount of fat

Too much fat



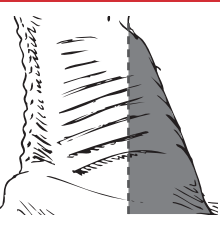
Hand makes an upside down 'v' over back



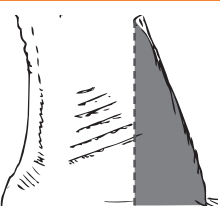
Hand makes a sideways 'c' over back



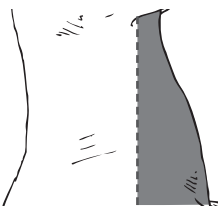
Hand is flat on back



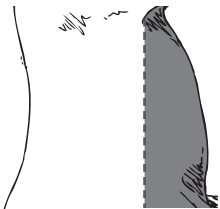
- The skin is tight over the ribs, which are very prominent
- Spine feels sharp and vertebrae easily felt



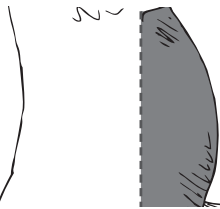
- Ribs easily felt
- Skin shrunken either side of spine
- Top of vertebrae well defined



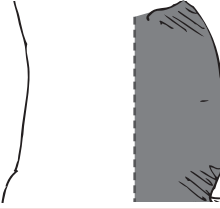
- Ribs can be felt
- Spine well covered
- Vertebrae can be felt but not seen



- Ribs just covered, easily felt
- No gutter along back
- Vertebrae well covered but can be felt



- Ribs well covered and not easy to feel
- Fat stored either side of the spine to form gutter along the spine to the root of the tail



- Ribs buried, cannot be felt
- Deep gutter along spine, back broad and flat

Score the horse only using areas of the body that are above the grey section.

Hindquarters Fat Scores

0

0.5

1

1.5

2

2.5

3

3.5

4

4.5

5

Not enough fat

The right amount of fat

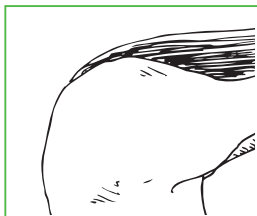
Too much fat



- Angular pelvis, tight skin, very sunken rump
- Deep cavity under tail and either side of croup



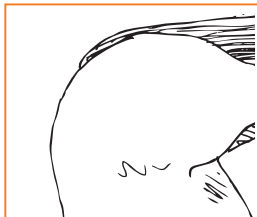
- Rump sunken but skin supple
- Pelvis and croup well defined, cavity under tail



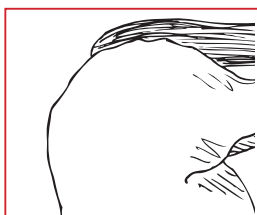
- Rump flat either side of spine
- Croup well defined, some fat
- Slight cavity under tail



- Pelvis covered by fat and rounded
- No gutter
- Pelvis easily felt



- Fat pads over pelvis create gutter from croup to tail
- Pelvis covered, felt only with firm pressure



- Significant fat pads over pelvis create pronounced gutter from croup to tail
- Skin distended
- Pelvis buried, cannot be felt

How to use a weigh tape

Weigh tapes are a valuable tool in monitoring your horse's weight. However, depending on the horse's breed and conformation, they may not always be as accurate as using a weighbridge.

Therefore, we recommend using a weigh tape to monitor changes in your horse's weight, but where possible weigh them at least twice a year on a weighbridge so you can calculate the difference between their weight from the weigh tape and the weighbridge. Many feed companies and independent equine nutritionists take portable weighbridges with them to consultations.

There are a range of weigh tapes available, which may all give different weights for the same horse. However, they will still pick up on any changes as long as you use the same tape each time. Some also have horse weights on one side, and pony weights on the other – so it's important to double check you are using the correct side.

Our top tips:

- ✓ Use the same type/brand of weigh tape each time.
- ✓ Try and weigh tape at a similar time of day each time.
- ✓ Some horses don't like the feeling of the weigh tape initially. Take your time and train them to accept the weigh tape using ethical training methods.
- ✓ Try and have your horse standing as square and still as possible.
- ✓ Make sure the weigh tape isn't twisted.

- 1 Tie up your horse and ask them to stand as square as possible.
- 2 Standing by the horse's shoulder, place the weigh tape at the lowest point of the horse's withers. Many tapes have a line or arrow to indicate where to read the weight from. We recommend having this on the side of the horse that you are standing beside.
- 3 Pass the remaining tape over to the far side of the horse and bring it as close as possible to the horse's elbow. The weight tape shouldn't sit around the widest part of the rib cage, think about where your girth sits across their breast plate. It can be beneficial to have someone on the far side to help you.
- 4 Gently pull the tape underneath the horse, checking it is close behind both elbows, and pull it up towards the end you are holding. The tape will have a slight angle on it.
- 5 Pull the tape round your horse firmly, but not so that it is digging in. Read the number (kgs) that is next to the arrow or line on the weigh tape. Make sure that your fingers are not underneath the tape, or this will affect the reading!
- 6 To finish up, gently release the tape and slide it over the horse's wither towards you.



Helpful tips

Here are a variety of ways to help your horse shape up. If your horse is very overweight, contact your vet before making any changes.

If safe and appropriate to do so, increase your horse's exercise. This will burn calories and help to keep your horse healthy. This doesn't need to be riding – you can work your horse in-hand.

Giving an overweight horse a high-energy feed because they seem sluggish won't necessarily give them more energy for work. It would be better to help your horse lose the excess weight and increase fitness.

Soak hay for 6 - 9 hours (less in warm water) using fresh water every time – to reduce its calorie content Remember to dispose of the waste water as effluent. Good quality straw can be mixed in with soaked or unsoaked hay to provide more bulk with fewer calories. Check your horse's droppings to make sure the straw fibres are around 4 mm long. If they are significantly longer, straw is not suitable. If you feed straw or soaked hay, you must also feed a general vitamin and



mineral supplement. It may be useful to have the hay analysed if your horse is prone to laminitis.

Many leisure horses will get more calories than they need from grass alone. A twist on strip grazing will encourage your horse to walk more whilst restricting the amount of grass available to eat; fence off a 'U' shape in the paddock – with the gate at one end and water at the other – or fence a square in the middle and only allow grazing around the outside edge. Providing they all get on, put more animals in the same field

or mow your grazing to mimic this effect – but make sure no cuttings are left in the field. Use a mower that doesn't leave oil or petrol on the field, as this can be dangerous. Maintain the grazing correctly, picking up droppings and removing poisonous plants.

If you use a hard feed, contact the manufacturer to check their definitions of light, medium or hard work – these may be different to yours, and you could be inadvertently over-feeding.

Weigh your feed and find a container that fits exactly the amount you should be giving. It is very easy for half a scoop to turn into three-quarters or more.

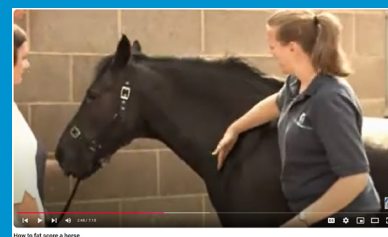
Reduce your horse's rate of consumption. Consider using a muzzle that slows grazing. Gradually build up the time spent wearing it to give your horse time to adjust. If feeding hay or haylage try using a small-holed haynet.

It's tempting to rug horses, but do remember that horses already have waterproof coats and their own central heating systems; digesting fibre generates heat that helps keep the horse warm from the inside out. If your horse is overweight consider whether it could go without a rug or if a lighter weight would be more suitable.

If you are giving your horse a hard feed just to add in a supplement this could be enough to stop him losing excess weight. Can you give the supplement in a way that provides fewer calories?

Fat-score and use a weigh tape on your horse every two weeks. You will notice any changes in weight far more quickly than you could by eye. Make sure you use the tape at the same time of day, as a horse's weight will fluctuate significantly over a 24-hour period.

Remember, if your horse's weight changes significantly at any point, their tack may no longer fit. This can lead to a variety of problems, so get this checked by an expert.



Watch our video on how to fat score your horse
www.worldhorsewelfare.org/advice/weight-is-your-horse-the-right-weight

Visit the World Horse Welfare website to watch a fat-scoring demonstration video.

It is a good idea to fat-score your horse once a fortnight and keep a record. That way, you will always know whether he needs to gain, lose or maintain weight. This is vital when deciding what to feed.

Remember that 'feed' includes grass, hay and haylage, as well as hard, or concentrate, feed.

Keep an eye on how your horse is affected by any changes you make. What is suitable at one stage may not be suitable a few weeks down the line. Remember to give your horse time to adjust to any changes you make.

If you need any further advice, speak to experts such as your vet, farrier and saddler. Most feed companies have help lines where you can speak to a qualified nutritionist.

You can also call our Advice Line, on 01953 497238.

Fat Scoring Record

Date	Neck/shoulder fat score (out of 5)	Back/barrel fat score (out of 5)	Hindquarters fat score (out of 5)	Average fat score (out of 5)	Weight (kgs)	Comments (e.g., not enough/ too much/the right amount of fat, neck is the danger area, etc.)



Not enough fat **The right amount of fat** **Too much fat**

Not enough fat
- review diet and management to
increase calorie content as required.

**The right
amount of fat**
– keep diet and
management as
they are.

Too much fat
- review diet to remove excess calories
and increase exercise as required.

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