

## Article of the month - How to monitor my horse/pony's weight

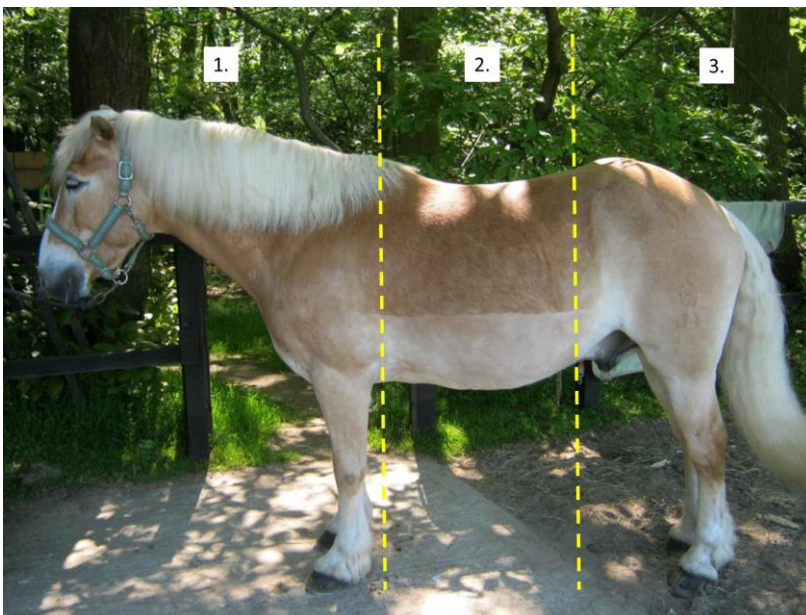
### Part 2 – How to Body Condition Score and Cresty Neck Score my horse or pony?

The best way to assess the presence of fat on our animal's bodies is to regularly assign them a Body Condition Score (BCS) (body condition scoring is often also referred to as fat scoring) and a Cresty Neck Score (CNS). As body condition scoring is a subjective measurement, if used in conjunction with an objective way of weight estimation (such as using a weighbridge or taking body measurements), it paints a clearer picture of the shape our animals are in.

#### Body condition scoring

You can't effectively estimate a BCS just by looking – you need to feel for the fat cover in certain areas. Viewing your horse/pony side on, divide their body into 3 sections (Fig. 1):

- **Section 1:** Neck and shoulder
- **Section 2:** Middle (Back and belly)
- **Section 3:** Bottom (Pelvis to tail)



*Fig. 1 Remember to make sure your horse/pony is standing square and straight on a level, firm surface.*

You are essentially going to look for fat deposits, or lack of, in each of the three sections. Referring to the images and descriptions in the Body Condition Score guide below, you will need to give your horse/pony one score out of five for their **neck and shoulder (section 1)**, one for their **middle (section 2)** and one for their **bottom (section 3)**, then take an average (add all three scores together and divide by 3). Horses store their weight in different areas, so an average of these scores will produce a more accurate assessment. In the BCS guide, the text that refers to each section has been colour-coded appropriately.

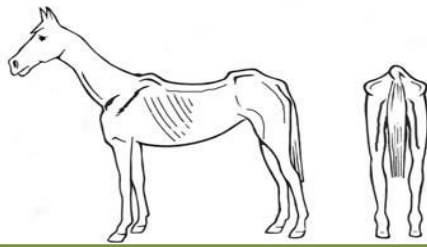
Once you have all three scores for each section, take an average to get the overall BCS score. So for example – if you score 4 for **section 1**, 3 for **section 2** and 4 for **section 3**, then your final average score would be  $(4 + 3 + 4) / 3 = 3.6$ .

For detailed instructions on how to determine BCS using this method, please follow the link below:

- [How to Body Condition Score and Cresty Neck Score your horse/pony](#)

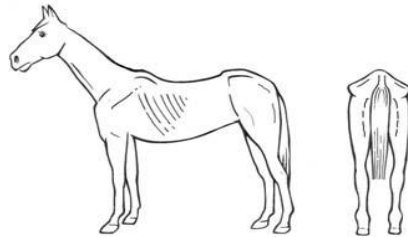
## Body Condition Score Guide

0



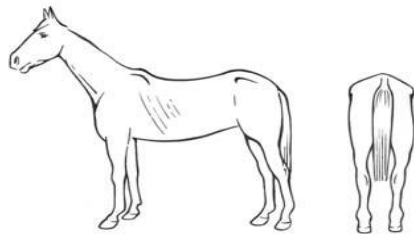
Marked 'ewe' neck, narrow and slack at base. Skin tight over the ribs, which are clearly visible. Spinous processes sharp and easily seen. Angular pelvis, skin tight, very sunken rump. Deep cavity under tail and either side of croup.

1



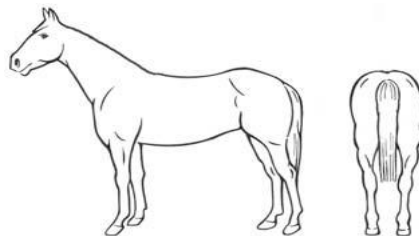
'Ewe' neck, narrow and slack at base. Ribs clearly visible. Skin clearly shrunken either side of spine. Spinous processes well defined. Rump sunken but skin supple, pelvis and croup well defined, cavity under tail.

2



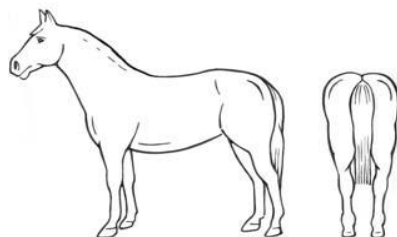
Neck narrow but firm, shoulder blade clearly defined. Ribs just visible. Spine well covered. Spinous processes felt but not seen. Rump flat either side of spine, croup well defined, some fat, slight cavity under tail.

3



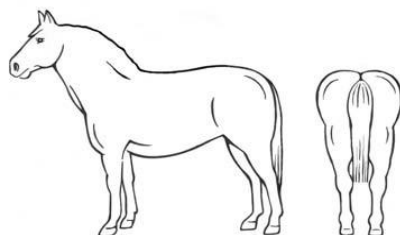
Firm neck, no crest (except stallions), shoulder blades defined. Ribs just covered, easily felt. No gutter along back. Spinous processes covered, but can be felt. Pelvis covered by fat and rounded, no gutter, pelvis easily felt.

4



Slight crest on neck, wide and firm. Ribs well covered. Gutter along spine to root of tail. Fat stored either side of the spine to form slight 'apple bottom', with a gutter down the middle. Pelvis covered, felt only with firm pressure.

5



Marked crest, very wide and firm, creases of fat. Shoulder blade buried and difficult to feel. Ribs buried, cannot be felt. Deep gutter along spine, back broad and flat. Deep gutter to root of tail, producing marked 'apple bottom', skin distended. Pelvis buried, cannot be felt.

Images obtained with kind permission from the National Equine Welfare Council.

## **Cresty Neck Scoring**

There are big differences between individual horses and ponies, both in terms of their abilities to gain/lose weight and where the excess weight (fat) is deposited and stored when they are overweight. Commonly, fat deposits are mistaken for muscle, for example with reference to a good “topline”. In horses, a nuchal ligament runs from the skull, along the neck, and through to the back. All muscles and bones (vertebrae) are located below this ligament. Whatever collects above this ligament is pure fat. Therefore in evaluating “topline” we need to focus on the bones and muscle structure and not fat. Another common misconception is that “topline” can be achieved by increasing feed or feeding more high-energy feed. Muscles are built through exercise and training combined with an appropriate diet – using diet alone to build condition frequently results in excess fat because more energy (calories) is being provided than being used. Fat would be deposited, for example, above the nuchal ligament and on either side of the spine – giving the appearance of a good “topline” although closer examination will reveal that what you are seeing is fat as opposed to muscle!

Usually the fat will feel different to muscle – it will be wobbly rather than firm (in extreme cases, large crests can feel firm and the skin may appear creased or dimpled). Cresty necks have been linked to underlying endocrine disorders and therefore laminitis (Fig. 2). Cresty necks are therefore not a healthy trait in geldings and mares or excessively so in stallions, who may naturally have some degree of a crest.



**Fig. 2** A pony with a marked cresty neck. The red line running from poll to withers shows the approximate location of the top of the nuchal ligament. The neck above this line is mostly composed of fat while muscle is found below this line.

In a similar way in which you assessed the score for the neck and shoulder in **section 1** of the BCS, you can also give our horse/pony a Cresty Neck Score (CNS) based on the images and descriptions below:

Score	Description
0	No palpable crest.
1	No visual appearance of a crest, but slight filling felt with palpation.
2	Noticeable appearance of a crest, but fat deposited fairly evenly from poll to withers. Crest easily cupped in one hand and bent from side to side.
3	Crest enlarged and thickened, so fat is deposited more heavily in middle of the neck than towards poll and withers, giving a mounded appearance. Crest fills cupped hand and begins losing side to side flexibility.
4	Crest grossly enlarged and thickened, and can no longer be cupped in one hand or easily bent from side to side. Crest may have wrinkles or creases perpendicular to the topline.
5	Crest is so large it permanently droops to one side.

