

What weight should my horse be?



A horse should not be fat or too thin. Until you gain experience it can sometimes be hard to tell however once you learn what to look out for it gets much easier.



This horse has a typical 'cresty' neck. Notice how it is lumpy rather than smooth which it would be if it consisted of muscle rather than fat.

The neck should not be overly 'cresty' which means that the top side of the neck should not be bulging, lumpy and hard. Stallions and some breeds of horses such as Andalusians, Friesians and similar breeds naturally have a more cresty neck than breeds such as Thoroughbreds and Standardbreds (although even these breeds sometimes have individuals with a naturally cresty neck). Pony breeds such as Shetlands and Welsh Mountains also have a naturally cresty neck. It is important to know what is normal for a particular horse and what is a build-up of too much fatty tissue. It is also necessary to be aware of what is 'normal' for your breed of horse, some breeds look bulk-

ier than others. You need to regularly feel the neck of a cresty horse to make sure that it is not becoming too hard/lumpy. Hard/lumpy means that the horse is storing too much fat (in much the same way that some overweight people store fat at the base of the neck).

You should be able to run your fingers across the sides of a horse and feel the ribs. Being able to see the last couple of ribs (nearer the 'hips') is fine also. If you can see *all* of the ribs then the horse is underweight (sometimes very fit horses such as racehorses and endurance horses have little or no fat over the ribs but have good muscle tone in other areas of the body which is fine).

These grazing horses are in great condition. They would score a 3 on the scale shown on the pages at the end of this article.



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If a horse is too fat the back will be very flat or there may even be a groove down the middle of the back as fat on either side of the backbone becomes raised higher than the spine. If a horse is too thin the spine will stand out and there will be a hollow area along either side of the spine.

A fat horse may have lumpy fat pads just in front of the hips and the backside of a fat horse will usually have a groove in the middle (above the tail) and will have pads of fat on either side of the tail head (where the tail meets the body) and down the backs of the buttocks. The backside of a thin horse will be hollow and the tail head will stand out.



This horse is too fat and needs more exercise.

In conclusion horses tend to store fat (that can be seen from the outside of the body) on the top side of the neck, on either side of the spine and across the ribs, on the 'hips' (i.e. just in front of the pelvis), across the top of the rump, around the tail head and down the back of the buttocks. A fat horse will usually also have fat around the sheath (in a male) or fat around the udder (in a female).

It is important to be able to distinguish fat from muscle. Fat tends to be lumpy, muscle is smoother. A fat horse will tire more quickly than a muscular horse. A thin horse will not only have used up its fat reserves but will often have very little muscle as well (and will also tire quickly). When a body is starved fat is used up first of all and then muscle is used in order to keep the animal alive. When a horse has reached this stage it needs experienced care in order to recover.



This horse is seriously underweight, all of the ribs can be seen and the backbone is standing out.

Being overweight is particularly dangerous for horses because they can develop a condition called laminitis and other obesity related disorders. Laminitis can be fatal for a horse and needs expert veterinary care.

Good horse care involves monitoring your horse's 'condition' so that it does not get too fat or too thin. Horses can vary in terms of where they tend to build up fat so you need to learn about what a fat horse and what a thin horse looks like so that you can make informed decisions about your own horse. Learn how to 'Condition Score' horses using the table on the next two pages. It gets easier the more you do it. The table goes from a condition score of 0 to 5. It can

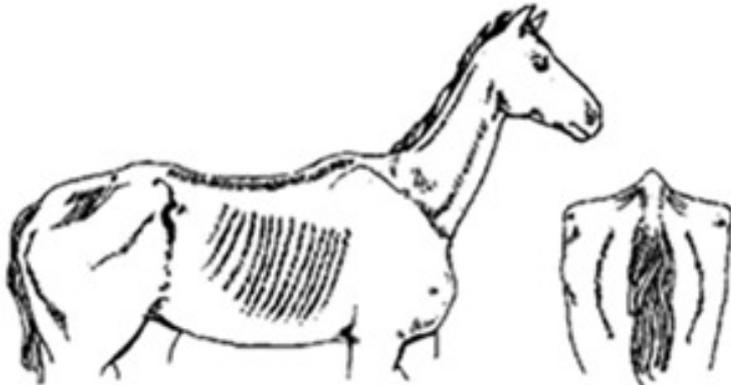
be useful to give a horse a score that is between two numbers if necessary (therefore a horse may have a score of 2.5 for example). Your horse should ideally have a score of around 3. See our publication [A horse is a horse - of course \(2011\)](#) for more information about natural horse feeding behaviour.

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Condition scoring 0 to 2



Score 0 - Very Poor

Neck - marked ewe neck - narrow and slack at base.

Back and ribs - skin tight over ribs, very prominent backbone.

Pelvis and rump - very sunken rump deep cavity under tail, angular pelvis skin tight.



Score - 1 Poor

Neck - ewe neck - narrow & slack at base
Back and ribs - ribs easily visible, skin sunken either side of backbone.

Pelvis and rump - sunken rump but skin supple, pelvis and croup well defined



Score 2 - Moderate

Neck - narrow but firm.

Back and ribs - ribs just visible, backbone well covered but able to be felt.

Pelvis and rump - flat rump either side of backbone, croup well defined, some fat slight cavity under tail.

Other signs that will be seen in an underweight horse include: a raised dull coat and poor hooves (if prolonged), listless behaviour, ravenous appetite/ poor appetite, droppings that are too dry/ too wet.

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Condition scoring 3 to 5



Score 3 - Good

Neck - firm, no crest (except in a stallion)

Back and ribs ribs just covered but easily felt, no gutter along back, backbone covered but can be felt.

Pelvis and rump - covered by fat and rounded, no gutter, pelvis easily felt.

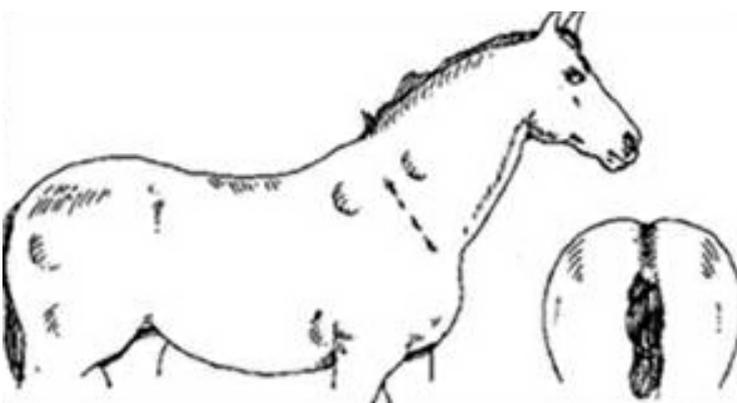


Score 4 - Fat

Neck - slight crest.

Back and ribs - ribs well covered, need firm pressure to feel, gutter along backbone.

Pelvis and rump - gutter to root of tail pelvis covered by soft fat - felt only with firm pressure.



Score 5 - Very Fat

Neck - marked crest, very wide and firm lumpy fat.

Back and ribs - deep gutter along back back broad and flat, ribs buried cannot be felt.

Pelvis and rump - deep gutter to root of tail, skin is distended, pelvis buried under fat.

From Horse Sense (2005), Huntington, Myers and Owens

Other signs that will be seen in an overweight horse include listless/'lazy' behaviour, ('hot' behaviour as the horse gains condition but lazy when too fat), increased sweating and swollen legs. A horse that is overweight has a much higher chance of developing laminitis - a very dangerous condition for equines.

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