



# Feed news

WINTER 2017

## THE ART OF BODY CONDITION SCORING

All horse owners want their horses to be healthy, look good and be physically fit athletes. Nutritional management is a simple, yet cost effective tool that we can apply to ensure, improved performance and health in our horses. Body condition scoring serves as an effective tool to determine the nutritional needs of your horse. Using a numeric scoring system from 1 to 9, we can estimate the horse's body energy reserves. This information can be used when deciding on the right feed choice. Body condition scoring involves the palpation and visual assessment of the degree of fat deposits of various areas of the horse, such as: over the ribs, tail head area, neck and withers, and behind the shoulders. Regular condition scoring of your horse will help in deciding if your horse needs to gain, lose or just maintain weight.

Body condition can be affected by a variety of factors such as:

- food availability,
- reproductive activities,
- weather,
- performance or work activities,
- parasites,
- illness
- dental problems,
- feeding practices.

The actual body condition of a horse can also affect its reproductive capability, performance ability and health status. Therefore, it is important to achieve and maintain proper body condition. In order to do this, one must evaluate body fat in relationship to body musculature.

### The System Explained

The body condition scoring (BCS) system assigns a numerical value to fat deposition as it occurs in various places on the horse's body. The system works by assessing fat both visually and by palpation (examination by touch), in each the following areas:

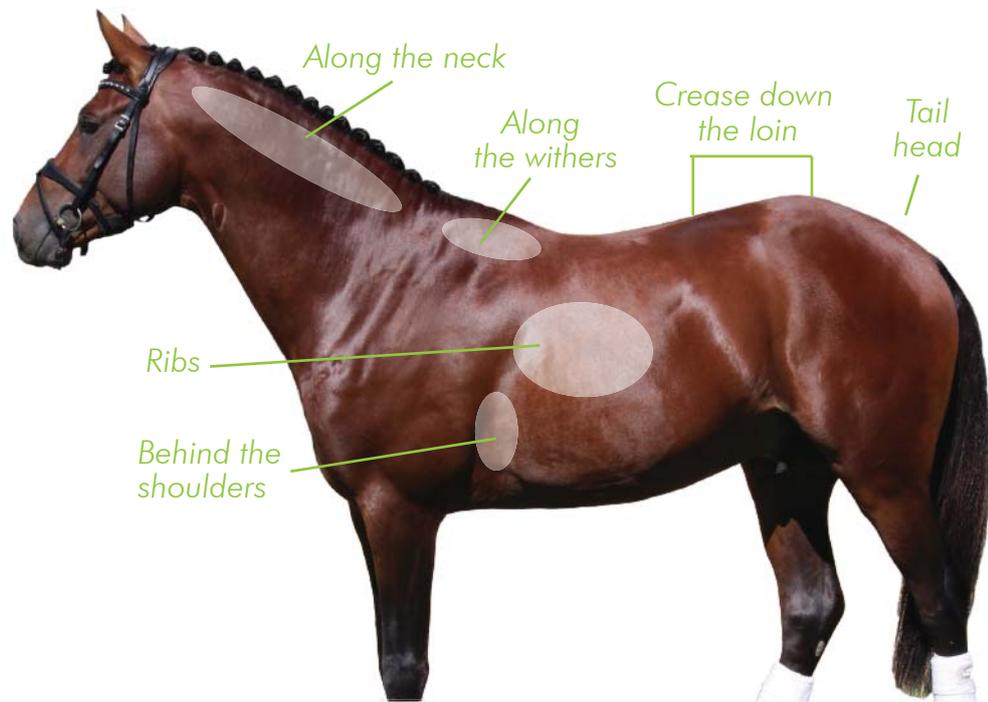
**Loin:** An extremely thin horse will have a ridge down the back where the back bone projects up. No fat can be felt along the back of the horse. However, this is one of the first areas to fill in as a horse gains weight. As the horse gets fatter, an obvious crease or depression forms down the back because of fat accumulation along the back.

**Ribs:** The next place to look is in the ribs. Visually assess the rib area, and then run your fingers across the rib cage. A very thin horse will have prominent ribs, easily seen and felt,

with no fat padding. As the horse begins to gain weight, a little padding can be felt around the ribs; by BCS 5 (see chart on next page) the ribs will no longer be visible, but can be easily palpated by passing a hand down the rib cage. Once the horse progresses towards obesity, feeling the ribs will be very difficult.

**Tail head:** In a very thin horse up to a BCS of 3, the tail head is prominent and easily visible. Once the horse starts gaining weight, fat fills in around the tail head. Fat can easily be palpated, and as the horse becomes obese, the fat will feel soft and begin to bulge.

**Withers:** Conformation of the withers may affect your assessment of body condition. The prominence or sharpness of the withers may vary between breeds;



a Thoroughbred typically has more prominent withers than a Quarter Horse. However, if a horse is very thin, the underlying structure of the withers will be easily visible. At a BCS of 5, the withers will appear rounded. At a BCS of 6 through 8, varying degrees of fat deposits can be felt along the withers. In obese horses, the withers will be bulging with fat.

**Neck:** The neck allows for refining the assessment of body condition. In an extremely thin horse, you will be able to see the bone structure of the neck, and the throatlatch will be very trim. As the horse gains condition, fat will be deposited down the top of the neck. A BCS of 8 is characterized by a neck that is thick all around with fat evident at the crest and the throatlatch.

**Shoulder:** The shoulder will also help you refine the condition score. As a horse gains weight, fat is deposited around the shoulder to help it blend smoothly with the body. At increasing condition scores, fat is deposited behind the shoulder, especially in the region behind the elbow.

### What does my horse's score mean?

Once body condition scores have been determined for your horses, how can you tell what is too fat or too thin?

**An optimum score has been described as a 5.** This horse has some fat but has not yet reached the fleshy point. A horse below a 5 may have fat stores too low to maintain a healthy status if stressed. Body fat reserves are important to the overall health of a horse because fat represents energy reserves that can be used during periods of stress.

**The thin horse** - Horses at a 3 or below have virtually no fat reserves; if more energy is needed, protein is broken down from muscle to meet energy requirements. Body fat also plays a role in reproduction, mares with a body condition score of 3 or below for instance develop endocrine imbalances and have difficulty conceiving. In addition to increasing the quantity of feed, horse owners should consider checking their horse's teeth, treating for internal parasites and evaluating their horse's health

status. Diets high in fat and soluble fibres are recommended if weight gain is desired, HYGAIN provides a range of high fat, high fibre feeds that assist body condition such as HYGAIN TRU CARE®, HYGAIN® EQUINE SENIOR® and the high fat supplement HYGAIN TRU GAIN®.

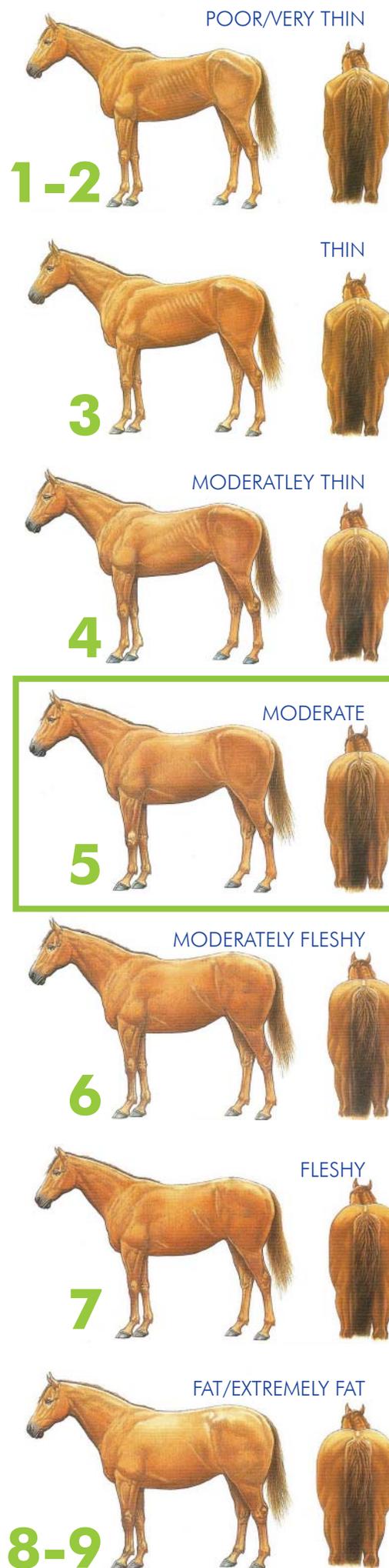
**The obese horse** - Horses with high condition scores are also predisposed to problems. Obese horses tend to be less agile performers and develop joint issues more readily than their optimal weighted counterparts. These horses are also more prone to colic and an array of metabolic diseases such as laminitis. In this case diets low in starch and sugar are desired, such as the fully fortified complete feed HYGAIN ZERO® (less than 1.5% starch) or the concentrated pellet HYGAIN BALANCED®.

One more factor you should consider when assigning a body condition score is the basic body type of your horse. Some horses, distribute their fat in different areas to others. A score of 5 may look different on a Quarter horse compared to a Thoroughbred.

This body condition scoring system will by no means tell you how fit your horse is for performance. Although horses in training will have less fat due to their exercise intensity, the fat level has nothing to do with muscle tone, cardiovascular fitness, or any other measure of athletic conditioning.

### Managing your horse's score

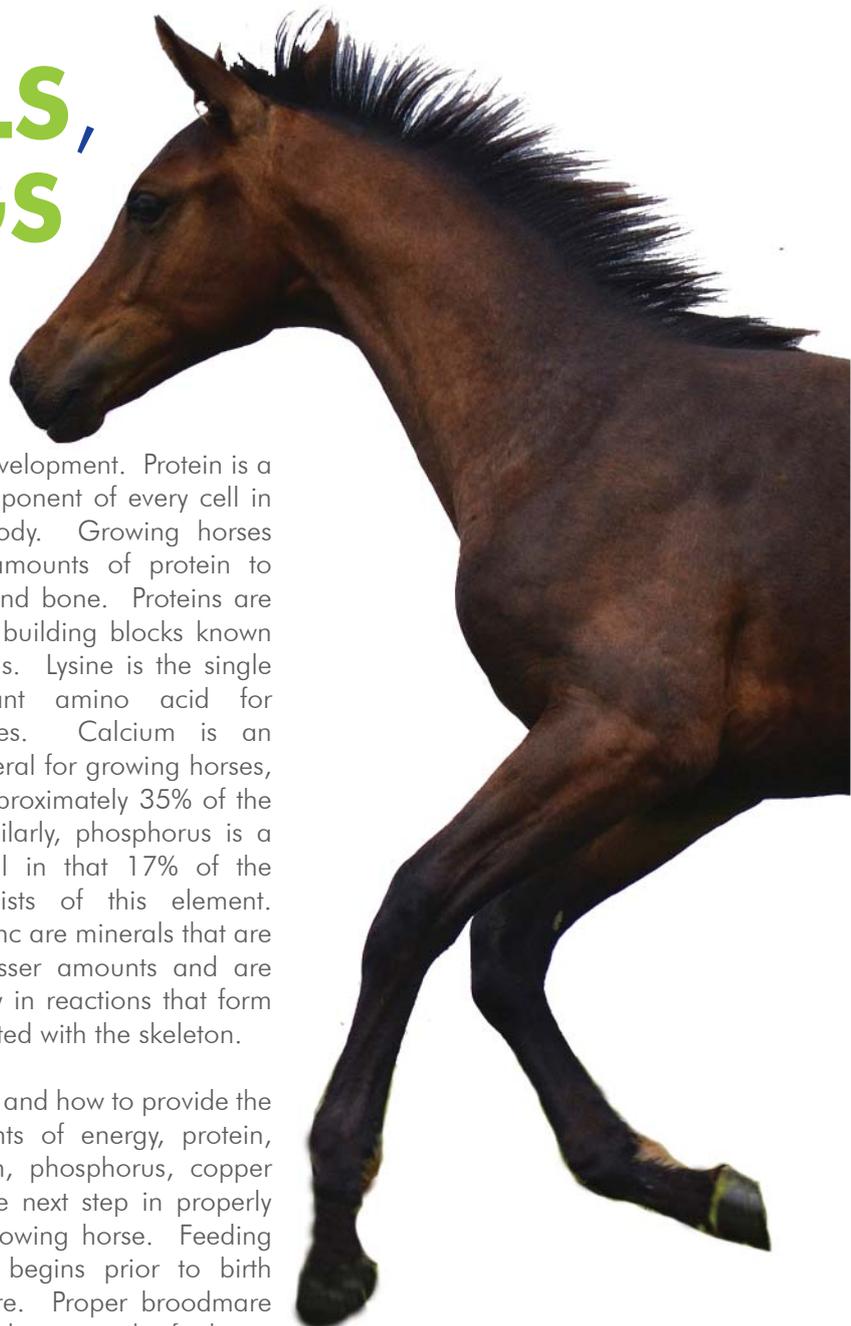
Regular body condition scoring of your horse is a valuable tool for proper horse management. Once you have identified the appropriate body condition score for your horse, you can evaluate the horse regularly and adjust the feed intake and exercise to maintain the ideal body condition score. *It is especially important to condition score the horse during winter, when extra energy is utilized to maintain body temperature and the winter hair coat makes visual observation more difficult.*



DOWNLOAD BCS CHART

Download your free copy of our Equine Body Condition Scoring Chart on our website ([hygain.com.au](http://hygain.com.au)) in the FACT SHEETS section.

# FEEDING FOALS, WEANLINGS & YEARLINGS



Fewer topics in equine nutrition stir more controversy than feeding the growing horse. Many factors add to the confusion of providing nutrition throughout these critical stages of life. For example, growing horses may have different commercial end points. Some will be shown in halter futurities where maximum growth and condition are required at a young age. Others will be prepared for sale, again requiring a “well-grown” individual and many will be kept on the farm to be used as replacement horses or future performance horses. These horses often have less pressure on them to look their best at a young age.

A healthy foal will grow rapidly, gaining in height, weight and strength almost before your eyes. From birth to age two, a young horse can achieve 90 percent or more of its full adult size, sometimes putting on as much as 1.5kg per day. Feeding young horses is a balancing act, as the nutritional start a foal gets can have a profound effect on its health and soundness for the rest of its life. As the foal’s dietary requirements shift from milk to feed and forage, *your role in providing adequate nutrition is vital.*

## Essential Nutrients

When nutritionally balancing diets for young horses, six nutrients should be initially considered to maximize skeletal health. These six nutrients are energy, protein (including the essential amino acid lysine), calcium, phosphorus, copper and zinc. The functions of these important nutrients are described below. Energy is necessary to run the reactions within the body that synthesize tissue. When energy is fed in excess of the animals requirements it is converted to fat and stored within the body. On the other hand, growing horses that do not receive adequate energy will become thin and ultimately slow their rate of

growth and development. Protein is a necessary component of every cell in the horse’s body. Growing horses utilize large amounts of protein to form muscle and bone. Proteins are composed on building blocks known as amino acids. Lysine is the single most important amino acid for growing horses. Calcium is an important mineral for growing horses, making up approximately 35% of the skeleton. Similarly, phosphorus is a critical mineral in that 17% of the skeleton consists of this element. Copper and zinc are minerals that are required in lesser amounts and are both necessary in reactions that form tissues associated with the skeleton.

Knowing when and how to provide the correct amounts of energy, protein, lysine, calcium, phosphorus, copper and zinc is the next step in properly feeding the growing horse. Feeding foals actually begins prior to birth within the mare. Proper broodmare nutrition will help ensure the foal gets off to a healthy start. Once the foal is born, they will gradually become interested in feed and may attempt to consume feed with the mare.

When you plan a feeding program for your young horses, several important factors need to be considered:

- Body changes involved in growth,
- Nutrient requirements of that particular breed of horse,
- The feed’s nutrient content,
- Anatomical limitations of a young horses’ digestive system. For example, you cannot feed young horses’ low-energy, bulky feeds because their digestive tracts are not large enough. Instead, young horses need concentrated sources of energy, protein, vitamins and minerals to meet their nutritive needs.

## The nursing Foal

Foals will meet their nutritional requirements in their first 2-3 months of age from the mare’s milk and pasture. If a foal and mare are in good condition, the foal does not need to start creep feeding until it is at least 2 months old. However, some may need to start creep feeding by 30 days of age. In the third month of lactation the mare’s milk production drops while the foal’s nutritional needs keep increasing. Therefore, foals have a nutrient gap. Creep feeding (that is, providing feed that the mare cannot get to) can give the foal extra nutrients to fill this gap.

Several aspects of creep feeding are very important:

- Start creep feeding when foals are about 8 to 12 weeks old. Make sure the feed is fresh daily and that foals are consuming it adequately.
- Use a creep feeder designed so that mares cannot gain access and so that foals will not be hurt. If you do not want a field type feeder, you can tie the mare in her stable, allowing the foal to eat.
- Put the creep feeder where mares gather frequently.
- Feed the creep feed at a rate of 1% of the foal's body weight per day (max - 1 kg/100 kg of body weight).
- Choose a feed that will be easy for the foal's baby teeth to chew such as an extruded or pelleted feed like HYGAIN TRU BREED® or HYGAIN® PRODIGY®.

### The Weanling

Generally foal performance decreases immediately after weaning. To minimize this "post weaning slump," make sure foals are consuming enough dry feed at weaning to meet their requirements. One way of doing so is by creep feeding. Managing growth during this time is very important because excessive weight

gain may cause bone abnormalities and long-lasting skeletal problems.

Feed weaned foals on a combination diet. Firstly, they should be fed good quality forage. They should have access to all the good quality pasture/hay they will consume and allowed all the voluntary exercise they want. *Research has shown that exercise strengthens bone, increases cortical thickness and makes for a sound future athlete.*

Secondly, weanlings should be fed hard feeds between 0.5kg - 1.5kg per day as per the recommendations listed on the product bag. Be careful not to overfeed weanlings with too much hard feed as this may result in rapid growth, which may harm skeletal and tendon development. Therefore, adjust feed intake according to the bag's feeding guide to avoid overfeeding.

### The Yearling

As a yearling's growth rate slows considerably by the age of 12 months, yearlings can consume more kilograms of dry matter. Therefore, they need lower nutrient

concentrations in their ration. Feed grain to yearlings at approximately 0.5 to 1.5 kg/100 kg of body weight. Even though yearlings require only 12% crude protein in the total ration, a 14% crude protein hard feed ration gives you more flexibility. With this level, even if you use different types of hays with protein variations, the horse will still get enough protein. A 400kg yearling may receive 1.5 to 2kg of hard feed per day plus free choice hay or pasture. The amount of hard feed required varies due to forage quality and quantity.

By the time yearlings are 18 months old (known as long yearlings), their growth rate has slowed even further. Although long yearlings only require 10% protein, you do not need to formulate a new ration for them. You can feed them the same ration as a 12 month yearling. As horses have highly individual requirements, you need to adjust feed consumption to account for changes in individual condition. Therefore, you must combine your knowledge of nutrition, your eye for condition and common sense to make the final adjustments on feed intake.

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