EQUINE GUELPH
helping horses for life

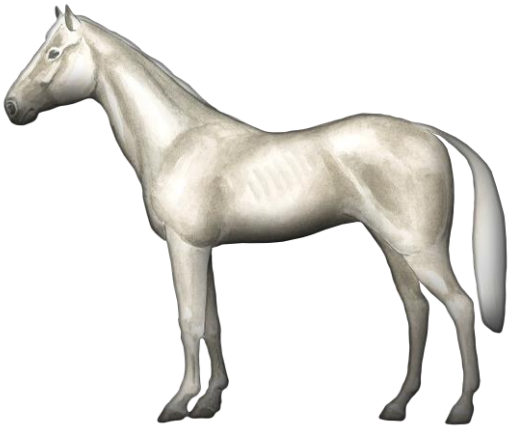
Don't settle for anything less than Ideal: Consequences of being Too Thin

The importance of body condition scoring your horse

When beauty is in the eye of the beholder, even experienced horse owners are often guilty of inaccurately assessing their horse for ideal body weight and condition. The Henneke Body Condition Score (BCS) system[1] is an in-depth and hands-on valuable scientific tool where physical palpation is used to find an overall BCS between 1-9. Equine Guelph has developed a barn poster to help horse owners keep accurate track of their horses BCS.

What is an underweight horse?

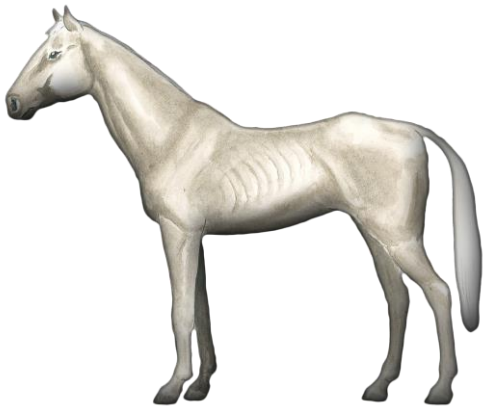
- Underweight horses are those with scores of less than 4 on the Henneke Body Condition Score system
- A score of 4 means the horse has the minimum acceptable amount of body fat. This may be acceptable for some (e.g. a performance horse), but may not be suitable for others. For instance, this level of body fat may be too low for a senior horse headed into the winter, who will have to deal with the stress of cold temperatures.



Body condition score 4

Risk factors[2]

- Poor dental health
- Poor parasite control program
- Inadequate nutrition
- Low dominance position in the herd[3]
- Disease



Body condition score 3
- a score of 3 or less requires intervention

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Consequences

- Troubles with thermoregulation (generating enough heat to stay warm in the winter)
- Loss of muscle mass
- Varying degrees of malnutrition
- Decreased athletic performance[4]
- Decreased reproductive performance[5]
  - Lower pregnancy rate
  - Increased number of cycles/conception
  - Delayed estrous and ovulation
- Disease

Management tips

- Schedule a veterinary exam (including dental exam and discussion of parasite programs) to address any underlying causes
- Increase dietary intake with input from veterinarian and nutritionist
- Including sweet smelling/tasting feed toppings may increase feed intake.[6] Including odours that the horse already knows may increase the acceptance of new foods.[7]
- Monitor the herd and the horse's behaviour
  - A companion may encourage appetite in horses housed individually
  - Separate the horse during feeding time if he is being bullied or is stressed
- Ease the stress of cold temperatures by making sure your horse has everything it needs this winter.
- Offer frequent small meals
- Dividing hay into small piles may increase interest in feeding by requiring the horse to move around and simulate foraging
- Soaked feed for easier digestion and to help with hydration
- Horses BCS 4 and under will need appropriate shelter and blankets in winter to maintain warmth. See the ThermoRegulator tool.

Purchase your Equine Guelph BCS poster for $9.99 plus shipping.

Artwork courtesy of Ruth Benns.

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Sources

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