

# WINTER READY: Your Elite Horse Health Guide

Part 1 of 4 - Weight & Body Condition



How to assess your horse's body condition this winter and what to do if something doesn't look right

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**Elite Equine Veterinarians**

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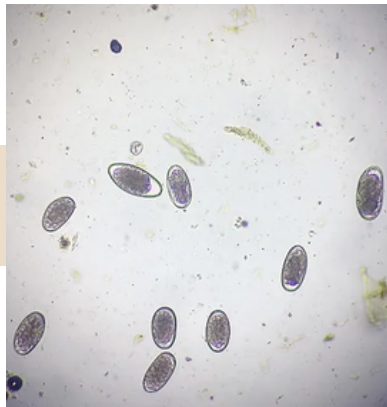
# Why Horses Lose Weight in Winter

Winter is one of the easiest times of year to miss subtle changes in your horse's body condition. A thick coat or rug creates the impression of a horse carrying plenty of condition - but the reality can be quite different.

A horse can gradually lose condition over several weeks without it being immediately obvious. By the time spring arrives and rugs come off, some horses are carrying significantly less weight and muscle than their owners realised.

## CLINICAL SIGNS

- Increased energy demands - horses burn more calories simply staying warm
- Reduced pasture quality - paddocks may look green but nutritional value drops in winter
- Dental disease - affecting the ability to chew and process feed efficiently
- Parasite burdens - reducing nutrient absorption
- Chronic pain or discomfort
- Underlying illness or inflammation
- Age-related changes - older horses are especially vulnerable
- Hormonal conditions such as PPID (Cushing's Disease)



### Note:

One of the biggest misconceptions we encounter is that weight loss automatically means a horse simply needs more feed. While that is sometimes true, weight loss can also be a symptom rather than the primary problem. Identifying the reason behind weight loss is often just as important as increasing calories.

# Don't Just Look - Feel

One of the best things you can do during winter is regularly put your hands on your horse rather than relying on what you see from a distance. A thick winter coat can make a horse look much heavier than they really are.

## SIX AREAS TO CHECK EVERY FEW WEEKS:

### RIBS

You should be able to feel the ribs easily but not see them. If you cannot feel them at all, your horse may be overweight. If they are clearly visible, your horse needs attention.

### TOPLINE

Run your hand along the spine from withers to tail. You should feel muscle either side of the spine. A sharp ridge or visible vertebrae signals muscle loss.

### NECK CREST

The crest should feel firm but not hard or cresty. A neck that is thin and flabby suggests poor condition.

### HINDQUARTERS

There should be good muscle coverage over the hindquarters. Prominent hip bones or a sunken appearance indicates condition loss.

### BEHIND THE SHOULDER

Feel for fat coverage in the hollow behind the shoulder. This area often shows changes in condition early.

### ALONG THE BACK

Feel either side of the spine for muscle depth. This is one of the first areas where horses lose condition.

### Tip:

Take a photo of your horse from the same angle every two to three weeks. Changes that are difficult to notice day-to-day often become obvious when comparing photos over time.

# Body Condition Score Chart

The Henneke Body Condition Scoring system rates horses on a scale of 1 to 9 based on fat coverage over key areas of the body. A score of 5 is considered ideal for most horses.

## Body Condition Score Chart

**Areas of emphasis for body condition scoring:** thickening of the neck, fat covering the withers, fat deposits along backbone, fat deposits on flanks, fat deposits on inner thighs, fat deposits around tailhead, fat deposits behind shoulders, fat covering ribs, shoulder blends into neck



### 1 Poor

Animal extremely emaciated; spine, ribs, tailhead, points of hip and buttock projecting prominently; bone structure of withers, shoulders, and neck easily noticeable; no fatty tissue can be felt.



### 2 Very Thin

Animal emaciated; slight fat covering over base of spine; ribs, tailhead, points of hip and buttock prominent; withers, shoulders, and neck structure faintly discernable.



### 3 Thin

Fat buildup about halfway on spine; slight fat cover over ribs; spine and ribs easily discernable; tailhead prominent, but individual vertebrae cannot be identified visually; points of hip appear rounded but easily discernable; points of buttock not distinguishable; withers, shoulders, and neck accentuated.



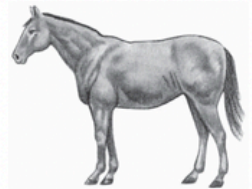
### 4 Moderately Thin

Slight ridge along back; faint outline of ribs discernable; tailhead prominence depends on conformation, fat can be felt around it; points of hip not discernable; withers, shoulders, and neck not obviously thin.



### 5 Moderate

Back is flat (no crease or ridge); ribs not visually distinguishable but easily felt; fat around tailhead beginning to feel spongy; withers appear rounded over spine; shoulders and neck blend smoothly into body.



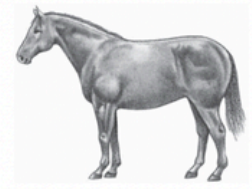
### 6 Moderately Fleshy

May have slight crease down back; fat over ribs fleshy/spongy; fat around tailhead soft; fat beginning to be deposited along sides of withers, behind shoulders, and along sides of neck.



### 7 Fleshy

May have crease down back; individual ribs can be felt, but noticeable filling between ribs with fat; fat around tailhead soft; fat deposited along withers, behind shoulders, and along neck.



### 8 Fat

Crease down back; difficult to feel ribs; fat around tailhead very soft; area along withers filled with fat; area behind shoulders filled with fat; noticeable thickening of neck; fat deposited along inner thighs.



### 9 Extremely Fat

Obvious crease down back; patchy fat appearing.

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# What Your Score Means This Winter



Use the guide below to understand what your score means and what action to take.

| SCORE | STATUS          | WHAT TO DO  |
|-------|-----------------|---|
| 1 - 3 | URGENT          | Contact your vet promptly. This level of condition loss requires investigation. Do not simply increase feed without veterinary guidance - there may be an underlying cause that needs addressing first. |
| 4     | MONITOR CLOSELY | Review your feed plan and increase calories as appropriate. Monitor closely over the next two to four weeks. Consider a veterinary check if condition does not improve.                                 |
| 5 - 6 | IDEAL           | Your horse is in good condition. Continue monitoring through winter and adjust feed if you notice any changes. Well done.   |
| 7 - 9 | OVERWEIGHT      | Review your horse's diet and exercise program. Excess weight puts pressure on joints and increases the risk of laminitis. Speak to your vet about a management plan.                                    |

## IMPORTANT:

A healthy body condition score does not mean your horse has no underlying health issues. Horses with dental disease, parasite burdens, or hormonal conditions may maintain a normal score while still requiring veterinary attention. Regular health checks are the best way to stay ahead of potential problems.