

## Body Condition

Advice from Dr. Robert Judd sounds like a no-brainer: Look at the horse to determine whether it is fit or fat. And while it's pretty easy to distinguish an obese horse from a very thin one, horse owners need to know the score to understand the criteria in between, writes Pat Raia in the Just issue of *The Horse*.

According to Judd, equine body condition is evaluated by a scoring system that rates the "fleshiness," or amount of visible and palpable fat on points along the horse's body. The system assigns values to fleshiness ranging from 1-indicating very poor or emaciated condition-to 9-indicating that a horse is extremely fat.

"Ideally, most horses should be a 5 or a 5 <sup>1/2</sup>," Judd said. "You should not be able to see their ribs, but you should be able to feel them."

With a body score of around 5, a horse is in moderate condition, and it's easy to feel his ribs and some spongy fat at the tailhead. Shoulders and neck smoothly blend into the body, and the withers appear round. A moderately fleshy horse-a 6 on the body condition scale-has spongy fat around the ribs, soft fat at the tailhead, and the beginnings of greater fat deposits at the withers, behind the shoulders, and at the neck.

"Performing or working horses may be at a 6 on the scale, Judd said. "But if a horse is at 7, it's time to cut something out."

With a score of 7, a horse is considered "fleshy" and on its way to an unhealthy body weight, according to Judd. Fat can be felt between individual ribs, along with increased fat deposits along the neck, at the withers, and behind the shoulders. A crease might also be visible along the back.

A horse with a score of 8 is considered fat. Ribs are difficult to feel and obvious thickness appears at the neck. Fat fills the withers area, behind the shoulders, and around the tailhead.

A horse with a score of 9 has patchy fat over the ribs, and bulging fat at the withers, the shoulders, along the neck, and at the tailhead indicate that a horse is extremely fat and at very high risk for a range of physical complications, including insulin resistance, Cushing's disease, and developmental orthopedic diseases (in the case of young horses).

Judd warned that horse owners should consult their veterinarians about feed changes and exercise regimens before setting their horses on a path to weight reduction.