

Evaluating Possible Equine Neglect And Abuse.

"Some Simple Guidelines For Consideration"



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Equine Evaluation

The purpose of this document is to provide some guidance in regards to the basic evaluation of equine (i.e. horses, donkeys, mules) as it pertains to body conditions which may indicate signs of possible neglect and/or abuse. We will illustrate various points using photographs and drawings of horses primarily, but the same factors pertain to other species of equine.

We will first look at body conditioning from starvation to obesity using the Henneke Body Conditioning System which is the system used by most veterinarians and law enforcement officers to evaluate a horse's condition. (i.e. scores range from 1 - 9). Please note that there are various factors that may come into play which makes the determination of a horse's body score difficult at best (i.e. breed, age, overall health, and seasonal eating patterns) without a hands-on evaluation and some knowledge of the equine's history.

Please note that this document is intended to merely be a guideline for initial evaluation. A thorough evaluation by a qualified equine veterinarian is essential to determine an equine's overall health.

The Henneke Scoring System of Body Condition

The Henneke System is a scoring system used to determine in an objective way what a horse's body condition is compared to an established "norm". The scoring system was developed in 1983 by Don R. Henneke, Ph.D., of Tarleton State Texas University, it is based on both visual appraisal and palpable fat cover of the six major points of the horse that are most responsive to changes in body fat.

The original purpose of the system was to determine the fertility of thin mares. It is a scientific method of evaluating a horse's body condition "somewhat" regardless of breed, body type, sex or age. It is now widely used by law enforcement agencies as an objective method of scoring a horse's body condition in horse cruelty cases. The chart has also been accepted in a hundreds of courts of law in equine cruelty cases.

The chart covers six major parts of the horse; neck; withers, (where the neck ends and the back begins) the shoulder area; ribs, loins, and the tailhead area. The chart rates the horses on a scale of 1 to 9. A score of 1 is considered poor or emaciated with no body fat. A nine is extremely fat or obese. A horse that is rated a 1 on the Henneke Chart is often described as a "walking skeleton" and is in grave danger of dying. Courts in the United States have upheld the seizure of such horses by law enforcement citing "exigent circumstances", meaning there was a very strong possibility the horse would die unless immediate action was taken. Generally, Equine Veterinarians consider a body score of between "4" and "7" as acceptable. A "5" is considered ideal in most cases.

Inspectors, veterinarians and law enforcement officers are trained to visually inspect the horse and also to palpate each part of the horse with their hands to feel for body fat. The examiner then assigns each area of the body the numerical score that corresponds with the horse's condition. When a horse has a long coat of hair it is imperative that the person scoring the horse

use their hands to feel the horse. The horse's long coat will hide the protrusion of bones, all except in the most extreme cases.

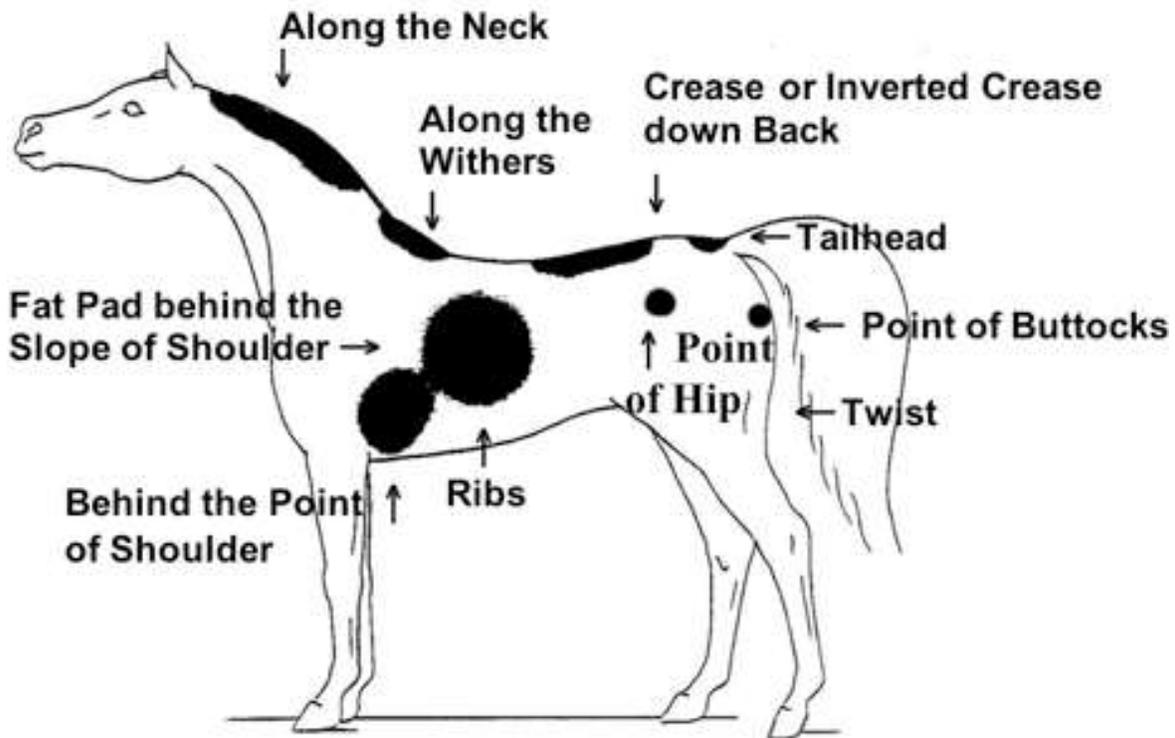
The scores from each area are then totaled and divided by 6. The resulting number is the horse's rating on the Henneke Body Scoring Condition Chart.

People working in this field will refer to the horse as being a "1 on the Henneke" or a "3 on the Henneke". The Henneke Chart is a standardized scoring system, whereas the terms, "skinny", "thin", "emaciated", or "fat" are all subjective terms that have different meanings to different people.

Note: some defense attorneys when cross examining veterinarians and horse experts have argued that the chart is not scientific. But as one full time equine veterinarian stated, "No it is not scientific, but it is as close as we are going to get."

The Henneke Body Scoring Condition Chart is readily available for public use and reference. The chart is printed on the back of several manufacturers of horse feed products and is on multiple websites.

The picture below shows the areas of fat that need to be checked in the Henneke System.



Differences between the species of horse (i.e. draft horse versus Arabian) may make certain criteria within each score difficult to apply to every animal. In these instances, those areas influenced by the breed should be discounted, but not ignored when determining the condition score.

The shape and condition of a horse's body score also changes in pregnant mares as they approach parturition (birth). Since the weight of the coming foal tends to pull the skin and musculature tighter over the back and ribs, emphasis should be placed upon fat deposition behind the shoulder, around the tail head and along the neck and withers in these cases.

Description of the Condition Score System

Score Description

1 - Poor:

The animal is generally emaciated. The horse has prominent spine or vertebrae, ribs, tail head and hooks and pins. The bone structure on withers, shoulders and neck are also visible. No fatty tissues can be palpated.

2 - Very Thin:

The animal again is generally emaciated. There is a slight fat covering over base of spine and vertebrae in the back. The spines of lumbar vertebrae feel a little more rounded. However the spinal vertebrae, ribs, tail

head and hooks and pins are still visible. The withers, shoulders and neck structures are faintly discernible.

3 - Thin:

There is a fat build up about halfway on the spine and the bones leading from the spine down to the horse's side can't be felt. There is a light fat cover over ribs but the ribs are still easily discernible. The tail head is prominent, but individual vertebrae cannot be visually identified. Hook bones appear rounded, but easily discernible. Pin bones not distinguishable. Withers, shoulders and neck are accentuated.

4 -Moderately Thin:

There is a negative crease along back. There is a faint outline of ribs discernible. The tail head prominence depends somewhat on the structure or breed of the horse, but fat can be felt around it. Hook bones are not discernible. The withers, shoulders and neck are not obviously thin.

5 - Moderate:

The back is level. Ribs cannot be visually distinguished, but can be easily felt. The fat around the tail head is beginning to feel spongy. Withers appear rounded. The shoulders and neck blend smoothly into body.

6 - Moderate to Fleshy:

The horse may have a slight crease down back. Fat over the ribs feels spongy. Fat around tail head feels soft. Fat is beginning to be deposited along the sides of the withers, behind the shoulders and along the sides of the neck.

7 - Fleshy:

The horse may have a crease down back. Individual ribs can be felt, but noticeable filling between ribs with fat. Fat around tail head is soft. Fat deposits along withers, behind shoulders and along the neck.

8 - Fat:

There is a crease down the back. It is difficult to palpate ribs. Fat around tail head is very soft. Area along withers filled with fat. Area behind shoulder filled in flush. There is a noticeable thickening of neck. Fat deposited along inner buttocks.

9- Extremely Fat:

There is an obvious crease down back. There is patchy fat appearing over ribs. Bulging fat around tail head, along withers, behind shoulders and along neck is also present. Fat along inner buttocks may rub together. Flank filled in flush.

Using the Henneke Scoring System

It is highly recommended that you understand the concept of the Henneke Body Scoring System because the definition of the term "thin" or "fat" is relative to what each of us has been taught to accept as thin or fat. By using the Henneke system we are using the "standard" that is widely accepted by the courts and law enforcement plus it is standardized and easy to understand.

In our world or society when a person acquires or rescues a horse we expect that that person will take care of the horse in a manner consistent with maintaining that horses' overall health and well being.

As an example, in the case of thoroughbreds or Arabians we know that they have a high metabolism, and require more food to stay fit than many other breeds do.

In other horses, it is not easy to keep that horse 'fit', regardless of the breed. This may be due to picky eating habits, inability to quickly add weight, age etc. It may require a lot on the part of the owner but it is

NOT impossible. It just requires more dedication and potential expense on the part of the owner.

In instances where owners are unable to get weight on or maintain the weight of a horse they've rescued, purchased or adopted they should be in contact with a veterinarian rather than let the animal waste away. A good rule of thumb is that an animal should never get below "4" generally.

On the following pages are pictures of horses at varying scoring levels. Please note that some of these pictures may be distressing, but it is necessary to provide them as a "visual" aid in this teaching process.

Horses with a body score of "1".



This foal was given a body score of "1" due the lack of fat on all six of the scoring areas.



This young Arabian was given a body score of "1" when rescued. Notice the lack of fat on the rear portion of its body and the visibility of its spine in the picture on the left. The photo on the right shows the horse after being rehabilitated and having a body score of "5".



The four pictures above are of a white Arabian with a body score of "1". This horse and three others in similar shape were all given the same body score after being examined by a veterinarian. It was estimated that each horse was between three and four hundred pounds under weight.



The picture on the left is of a twenty year old Clydesdale. When rescued his body score was rated at 1.5 or 2.0 on the Henneke scale. He weighed 1,314 pounds at the time of his rescue.

The picture on the right shows the same horse after rehabilitation. His body score was 5.5 and he weighed 1800 pounds.



This 23 year old Appaloosa was given a body score of 2.0. Her age was a factor but you can see by her spine that she was severely underweight.



This young horse was given a body score of 3. Notice the lack of fat near the withers and the tailbone area in this picture. She was approximately two hundred pounds underweight at the time of her rescue.



The horses above were given a body score of "4". They are moderately thin. Note that the horse below appears to be thinner near her withers but her overall body score came out as a "4".



This horse has a body score of "5". Note that its back is flat. The ribs are not visually distinguishable but you would be able to feel them if you palpitated the horse's side with your hands.

Also the withers are rounded over the projections of the backbones, and the shoulders and neck blend smoothly into the horse's body.



This "paint" was given a body score of "6". This was due to the fact that spongy fat was visible and could be felt over its ribs and tailhead.



This horse has a body score of "7". Notice the filling in around the ribs with fat. There is also evidence of fat being stored up along the withers, behind the shoulders and along the crest of the neck. Fat also appears to be present around the tailhead and the stomach appears to be extended.



This horse with a body score of "8" has obvious fat storage along the tailhead and rump area. There is also evidence of fat along the withers and behind the shoulders. There are additionally large deposits along its flanks and inner thighs.



This horse has a body score of "9". It is approximately three hundred pounds overweight. It has large visible deposits of fat around its withers and bulging fat deposits around the tailhead, shoulders and along its neck.

In summary, we hope that this basic information regarding the Henneke Scoring scale along with the drawings and photographs provided will give you a basic understanding of the nuances involved in determining an equine's body condition.

Again we must emphasize that there are a number of variables that can affect an equine's appearance. Not every thin horse is being neglected. If there is any question, we encourage you to get a qualified and experienced equine veterinarian involved.