

EQUINE BODY CONDITION SCORING

Using The Henneke Scoring System

A Resource Guide from

LAYLA ROSE RANCH EQUINE RESCUE

Parker County, Texas



Our mission is to rescue, rehabilitate, and rehome horses in need while educating the community about proper equine care and welfare.

About This Guide

At Layla Rose Ranch Equine Rescue in Parker County, Texas, we have extensive experience rehabilitating horses from all conditions - from severely emaciated animals requiring intensive care to overweight horses needing careful weight management. This guide shares the knowledge we've gained through years of hands-on rescue work to help horse owners, caregivers, and community members understand and apply proper body condition assessment.

The Henneke Body Condition Scoring System, developed by Dr. Don Henneke at Texas A&M University, has been an invaluable tool in our rescue operations, providing objective measurements that guide our rehabilitation programs and help us document the progress of horses in our care. We've created this comprehensive resource to make this essential knowledge accessible to everyone who cares for horses.

Why We Created This Resource

- To help horse owners identify nutritional problems before they become serious
- To provide objective standards for assessing equine welfare
- To educate our community about what proper body condition looks like
- To support other rescue organizations in their important work
- To honor every horse that has come through our rescue by sharing what they've taught us
- To prevent neglect through education rather than just intervention

Our Experience

Since our founding, Layla Rose Ranch has rescued, rehabilitated, and successfully rehomed numerous horses and donkeys. Each one has taught us valuable lessons about nutrition, health, and the remarkable resilience of these magnificent animals. From skeletal rescues that required months of careful refeeding to obese horses at risk for laminitis, we've seen firsthand how proper body condition assessment and management saves lives.

This guide represents the collective wisdom gained from working closely with veterinarians, equine nutritionists, and experienced horse professionals, combined with our practical, daily experience in equine rescue and rehabilitation. We're not the smartest people in the world, but we know some. And we want to help!

The Henneke Body Condition Scoring System

The Henneke Body Condition Scoring System was developed by Dr. Don Henneke at Texas A&M University in the early 1980s as part of his doctoral research. It provides a standardized, scientific method to evaluate the amount of fat on a horse's body.

This system is widely recognized and used by veterinarians, animal welfare organizations, rescue operations, and horse owners worldwide. At Layla Rose Ranch, we use this system daily to:

- Assess incoming rescue horses and document their initial condition
- Track rehabilitation progress with objective measurements
- Make informed decisions about feeding programs
- Communicate clearly with veterinarians and foster families
- Provide documentation for welfare cases when necessary
- Educate adopters about maintaining healthy body condition

Why Body Condition Matters: Lessons from Our Rescue

Through our rescue work, we've witnessed the life-threatening consequences of improper body condition and the remarkable transformations possible with proper care. **Refer to the Images on the next page to add a visual to the score.**

Too Thin (Scores 1-3)

- Weakened immune system leading to frequent illness
- Inability to maintain body temperature in cold weather
- Organ damage that can be permanent if prolonged
- Reproductive failure in breeding animals
- Increased susceptibility to parasites and disease
- Behavioral changes including depression and lethargy

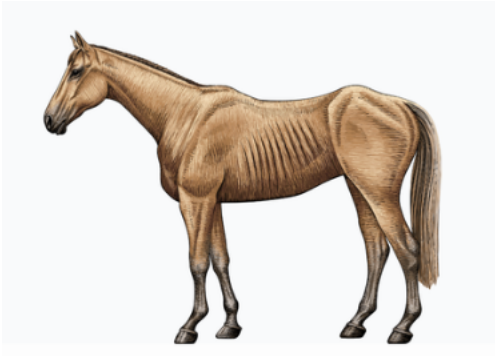
Ideal Condition (Scores 4-6)

- Strong immune function
- Optimal performance ability
- Healthy reproductive function
- Good temperature regulation
- Positive mental state and appropriate behavior
- Longevity and quality of life

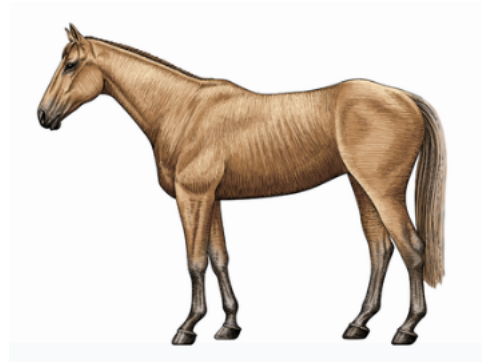
Too Heavy (Scores 7-9)

- Laminitis (founder) - a painful, life-threatening condition
- Metabolic syndrome and insulin resistance
- Joint stress and increased arthritis
- Reduced athletic ability
- Heat stress and breathing difficulties
- Shortened lifespan

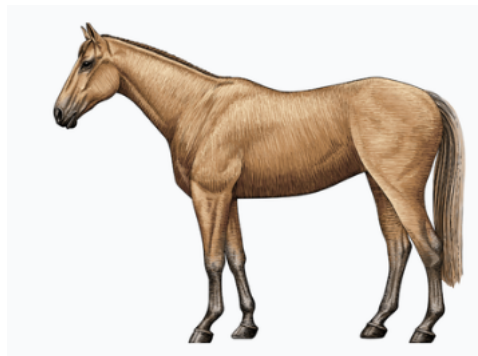
Reference Images



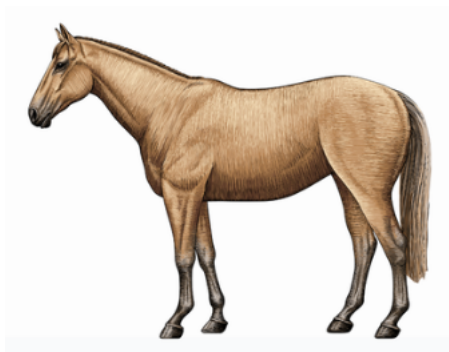
Score = 1



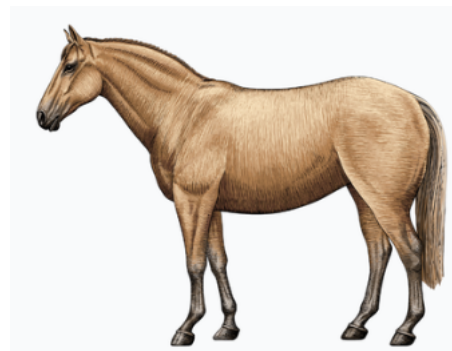
Score = 3



Score = 5



Score = 7



Score = 9

Understanding the 1-9 Scale

The Henneke system uses a numerical scale from 1 (emaciated) to 9 (extremely obese). Each score is based on evaluation of six specific body areas where horses deposit fat in predictable patterns.

From Our Rescue Experience: We've rehabilitated horses at every point on this scale. However, being a rescue, the most common rescue cases we see are scores 1-4 (neglect). This condition requires careful management to return horses to healthy condition.

Score	Classification	What We See at the Rescue
1	Poor (Emaciated)	Life-threatening - intensive veterinary care required
2	Very Thin	Severe neglect - careful refeeding protocol needed
3	Thin	Underweight - gradual weight gain program
4	Moderately Thin	Lower healthy range - monitor closely
5	Moderate (IDEAL)	TARGET - what we aim for in rehab
6	Moderately Fleshy	Upper healthy range - good for broodmares
7	Fleshy	Overweight - weight loss program needed
8	Fat	Obese - serious health risks
9	Extremely Fat	Critical obesity - immediate intervention

OUR TARGET AT LAYLA ROSE RANCH: We aim for a score of 5 (ideal) before placing horses for adoption. Some horses maintain better at 4.5 or 5.5, and we work with adopters to understand each horse's individual needs.

The Six Key Assessment Areas

Body condition is evaluated by assessing fat deposition at six specific locations. At Layla Rose Ranch, we teach all our volunteers and foster families how to assess these areas so everyone involved in a horse's care can monitor progress.



Rescue Tip: When assessing rescue horses, we try to score each area individually before calculating the average. Some horses lose weight unevenly, and this helps us identify specific problem areas and track where improvement is happening first.

Area 1: NECK

Location: Along the topline from poll to withers

How to Assess: Run your hand along the crest of the neck, feeling for fat deposits. Press gently to feel the underlying structure.

Ideal Appearance (Score 5): Smooth topline blending into shoulders, no prominent bones, natural muscling visible

Signs of Being Too Thin (Scores 1-3): Visible vertebrae, thin pencil-like appearance, no crest definition

Signs of Being Overweight (Scores 7-9): Thickened crest, hard fat deposits (feels like a firm log), difficulty moving side to side

From Our Rescue Experience: *In severely emaciated horses, the neck often shows bone structure first. As horses gain weight during rehabilitation, the neck fills in and develops natural muscling. Conversely, a rock-hard, immovable crest indicates dangerous fat deposits we see in obese horses - this fat doesn't disappear easily even with diet changes.*

Area 2: WITHERS

Location: The prominent ridge at the base of the mane where neck meets back

How to Assess: Place hands on both sides and press down moderately. Feel for the spinous processes (backbone projections).

Ideal Appearance (Score 5): Rounded over the spine, smooth transition from neck to back, some muscling visible

Signs of Being Too Thin (Scores 1-3): Sharp, knife-like projection; prominent bones; deep hollows on both sides

Signs of Being Overweight (Scores 7-9): Completely filled in with fat, no definition, spongy feel throughout

From Our Rescue Experience: *Withers are often the last area to fill in during weight gain and one of the first to show in weight loss. When we receive severely thin horses, the withers can be so prominent that saddle fitting becomes impossible until they gain condition. We've learned patience is key - it can take 3-6 months for this area to properly fill in.*

Area 3: SHOULDER

Location: Behind the shoulder blade where it meets the rib cage

How to Assess: Place your flat hand behind the shoulder and press gently inward.

Ideal Appearance (Score 5): Smooth transition from shoulder to ribs, naturally filled in without bulging

Signs of Being Too Thin (Scores 1-3): Deep hollow or sunken appearance, visible gap between shoulder and ribs

Signs of Being Overweight (Scores 7-9): Bulging fat deposits creating a rounded, overstuffed appearance

From Our Rescue Experience: *The hollow behind the shoulder is one of the most telling signs of severe weight loss. In rescue cases, this hollow can be several inches deep. As horses recover, watching this area fill in is incredibly rewarding - it's often one of the first visible signs that rehabilitation is working.*

Area 4: RIBS

Location: Along the barrel of the horse from front to back

How to Assess: Run your hand along the ribs with moderate pressure (like a firm massage). Try to count individual ribs.

Ideal Appearance (Score 5): Ribs not visible but easily felt with light pressure; smooth side profile

Signs of Being Too Thin (Scores 1-3): Individual ribs clearly visible and protruding; spaces between ribs prominent; skin appears tight

Signs of Being Overweight (Scores 7-9): Cannot feel individual ribs without pressing hard; thick spongy fat layer

From Our Rescue Experience: *Ribs are often what people notice first when they see a neglected horse. In our worst cases, every rib is visible and protruding. We've learned that while ribs show weight loss quickly, they also respond well to proper feeding - typically horses show visible improvement in rib coverage within 2-3 weeks of adequate nutrition. However, it takes months to achieve ideal coverage.*

Area 5: LOIN (BACK)

Location: Along the spine from behind the saddle area to the croup

How to Assess: Run your hand along the backbone, pressing down to feel the vertebrae.

Ideal Appearance (Score 5): Level back, spine can be felt but not prominent, no crease, good muscle on either side

Signs of Being Too Thin (Scores 1-3): Prominent spine with individual vertebrae visible; dipped or hollow appearance; no muscle coverage

Signs of Being Overweight (Scores 7-9): Deep crease running down center (looks like a gutter); fat bulging on both sides; cannot feel spine

From Our Rescue Experience: *The back tells two very different stories. In emaciated horses, the spine protrudes so prominently that it's painful to see. In obese horses, that telltale crease down the back signals serious health risks. We've had horses come in at both extremes, and both require careful management. The goal is that level back with just enough covering that you can feel the spine with gentle pressure.*

Area 6: TAILHEAD

Location: Around the base of the tail and hip/pelvic area

How to Assess: Feel around the tailhead and hip bones (tuber coxae/hooks and tuber ischii/pins) with moderate pressure.

Ideal Appearance (Score 5): Smooth, rounded appearance; bones can be felt but not jutting; slight soft fat covering

Signs of Being Too Thin (Scores 1-3): Hip bones and pelvic bones protruding sharply; tailhead bones prominent; deep depressions

Signs of Being Overweight (Scores 7-9): Bulging fat around tail base; very soft jelly-like feel; cannot locate bones easily

From Our Rescue Experience: *The tailhead area is particularly telling. In severely thin horses, those hip bones stick out like coat hooks - that's actually where the name comes from. We've had horses arrive where these bones were so prominent you could hang a bucket on them. Conversely, in obese horses, this area becomes so padded with fat that you can't find the bones at all. Both situations indicate serious problems.*

How to Perform Body Condition Scoring

At Layla Rose Ranch, we've trained dozens of volunteers, foster families, and adopters in body condition scoring. Here's the systematic approach we teach:

Our Step-by-Step Process

Step 1: Preparation

- Ensure horse is standing squarely on level ground
- Remove all blankets, sheets, and equipment
- Choose a location with good, even lighting
- Have a scoring sheet ready to record individual area scores
- NOTE: Long winter coats hide condition - palpation is absolutely essential

Step 2: Visual Assessment (Stand 10-15 feet away)

- View horse from left side - observe overall body shape
- Move to right side and compare
- View from front - note chest and shoulder development
- View from rear - observe hip area and hindquarters
- Take initial photos from all four angles

Step 3: Hands-On Palpation of Each Area

- Approach horse calmly (many rescue horses are sensitive to touch)
- Use firm but gentle pressure - like a good massage
- Start at the neck and work systematically through all six areas
- Score each area individually on the 1-9 scale
- Write down each score before moving to the next area

Step 4: Calculate Overall Score

- Add all six individual area scores together
- Divide the total by 6 to get the average
- Half-point scores are acceptable (e.g., 4.5, 5.5)
- Round to nearest whole or half number

Step 5: Document Everything

- Record date and overall score
- Note individual area scores
- Take clear photos from all four sides
- Document current feeding program
- Record any health concerns or changes
- Compare to previous assessments if available

Special Considerations for Rescue Horses

From Our Experience:

- Rescue horses may be defensive about being touched - approach slowly and speak softly
- Some areas may be sensitive or painful - watch for flinching or resistance
- In severely emaciated horses, bones can be sharp - be gentle to avoid causing pain
- Document thoroughly at intake - these initial scores and photos are critical
- Reassess every 2 weeks during active rehabilitation
- Expect uneven weight gain - some areas fill in before others
- Don't be discouraged by slow progress - healthy weight gain takes time
- Celebrate small improvements - every quarter-point gain matters

Action Steps

If you see a horse in poor condition, here's what we recommend:

EMERGENCY (Call Vet Immediately):

- Body condition score 1-2 (bones prominently visible everywhere)
- Horse down and cannot/will not get up
- No water available
- Obvious signs of suffering or distress

CONCERNING (Needs Attention):

- Body condition score 3 (thin - ribs easily visible)
- Body condition score 8-9 (obese)
- Inadequate feed or water
- Poor shelter in extreme weather
- Multiple horses in poor condition

Detailed Henneke Body Condition Scores 1-9

Based on our years of rescue experience (and some help from our vet), here are detailed descriptions of each score. We've included what we typically see at each level and how we approach rehabilitation or management.

EMACIATED (Scores 1-2)

Description: Extremely thin to very thin. All bones prominently visible. Little to no fat anywhere on body.

Our Rescue Approach: These are our most critical cases. Horses at this level require immediate veterinary care and a carefully supervised refeeding protocol. We cannot simply "feed them up" - doing so can be fatal. Refeeding syndrome is a real danger. These horses need small, frequent meals of easily digestible food, close monitoring, and usually 6-12 months of careful rehabilitation. Many require treatment for parasites, dental work, and management of other health issues that contributed to their condition.

Typical Timeline: *Expect 6-12 months to reach ideal condition*

THIN (Score 3)

Description: Ribs easily visible, tailhead prominent, neck and shoulders thin. Fat cover minimal.

Our Rescue Approach: These horses need increased nutrition but can typically be fed more normally than scores 1-2. We gradually increase feed while monitoring closely. Usually these horses have been underfed or have health issues preventing proper weight gain. Veterinary exam essential to rule out parasites, dental problems, or illness.

Typical Timeline: *Expect 3-6 months to reach ideal condition*

IDEAL (Score 5)

Description: Ribs easily felt but not visible. Back level. Neck and shoulders blend smoothly. This is our target.

Our Rescue Approach: This is where we want every horse to be before adoption. At this condition, horses are healthy, have good energy, and can handle the stresses of adjusting to a new home. We work with adopters to help them maintain this ideal condition.

Typical Timeline: *Maintenance - monitor monthly*

OVERWEIGHT TO OBESE (Scores 7-9)

Description: Difficult to feel ribs. Crease down back. Thick neck. Fat deposits throughout. At score 9, bulging fat.

Our Rescue Approach: These horses face serious health risks, especially laminitis. Weight loss must be gradual - no more than 1% of body weight per week. We provide measured hay (no free choice), no grain, increased exercise when possible, and close monitoring. Some horses need muzzles on pasture. Veterinary testing for metabolic issues is essential.

Typical Timeline: *Expect 6-12 months for healthy weight loss*

Quick Reference Guide

Score	What You See	Action
1-2	All bones visible	EMERGENCY - Vet now
3	Ribs easily seen	Increase feed, vet check
4-6	Ribs felt, not seen	IDEAL - Maintain
7-8	Can't feel ribs	Reduce feed gradually
9	Bulging fat	EMERGENCY - Vet now

Every equine deserves proper care and nutrition. Through education and community support, we can prevent neglect and ensure all horses live healthy, comfortable lives. Thank you for taking the time to learn about proper body condition assessment.

Daily Nutritional Requirements

Understanding basic nutritional needs helps you evaluate if a horse is being properly cared for. Here's what we provide at Layla Rose Ranch:

Water - Non-Negotiable

Requirement: 10-15 gallons per day minimum for average 1,000 lb horse

Water is THE most critical nutrient. At our rescue, we check water sources multiple times daily. In Texas heat, horses can need 20+ gallons. Dehydration kills faster than starvation. Every horse must have clean, fresh water available 24/7.

Forage - Foundation of Every Diet

Requirement: 15-25 lbs hay per day for 1,000 lb horse (1.5-2.5% body weight)

At Layla Rose Ranch, we feed quality grass hay free-choice to most horses. Horses are designed to eat constantly - their stomachs produce acid 24/7. Going long periods without food causes ulcers. Free-choice hay is ideal, but if you must limit intake, feed at least 3 times daily.

Concentrates (Grain) - Not Always Needed

Many horses do fine on hay alone. We use grain for horses in heavy work, growing horses, or those needing extra calories during rehabilitation. When feeding grain: never more than 5 lbs per feeding, divide into twice daily meals.

Our goal at the Rescue is to move horses to a 100% forage diet. However, when we do so, we add a rational balancer or nutritional supplement to ensure they are getting 100% of their daily nutritional needs met. When to Call for Help

Resources and Contact Information

Layla Rose Ranch Equine Rescue

Parker County, Texas

If you've found this guide helpful or if you need assistance with a horse in your area, please don't hesitate to reach out. While our rescue operates in Parker County, we're always willing to provide guidance and connect people with resources. laylaroseranch.org

How You Can Help

- Donate hay, feed, or supplies
- Volunteer at the rescue
- Consider adopting a rescue horse
- Share this guide with other horse owners
- Report suspected neglect to appropriate authorities
- Support equine welfare education in your community

Additional Resources

- Local veterinarians with equine experience
- Texas A&M Large Animal Hospital
- County extension agents
- Local feed stores with knowledgeable staff
- Equine nutrition consultants
- Other equine rescue organizations

With gratitude for every horse that has taught us these lessons, and to Dr Henneke

The Team at Layla Rose Ranch Equine Rescue

Parker County, Texas

NOTE AND THANKS This guide is based on the Henneke Body Condition Scoring System developed by Dr. Don Henneke at Texas A&M University, combined with practical experience from years of equine rescue and rehabilitation.