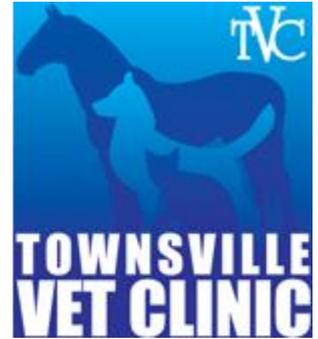


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**NORTH QUEENSLAND SPECIALIST EQUINE SERVICE**

**Equine Body Condition and Weight Management**

Have you been wondering if your horse is too fat? Too skinny? Why does it matter? We can help you to assess your horse and give you advice to keep your horse in good/healthy body condition.

Measuring body condition is easy. There are condition score scales, like this one from Kentucky Equine Research. They're easy to use, being based on how prominent or covered bony prominences like the ribs and hips are, and muscle and fat covering of the neck.

You can also use a weight tape, which goes around the horse's girth. They are accurate enough that equine veterinarians use them to estimate a horse's weight for anesthesia in the field.

**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; bony 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 discernible.

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

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

**5 Moderate**  
 Back in fat (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.



BCS 2



BCS 5



BCS 8

Some horses maintain their body weight well or are “good doers”, such as quarter horses, some stock horses, and ponies. Other breeds, such as thoroughbreds, can appear to need more feed than their paddock mates.

This means you must feed each horse individually, depending on their requirements. Maintaining a good quality consistent diet and access to clean drinking water is the way to keep your horse thriving.

### What to feed

There are plenty of options out there, and well-meaning advice, but really, it's simple. Feed the best quality diet your horse needs for its body condition the work it is doing.

Horses have evolved to eat grass, so it's not a surprise they need lots of it. 1.5-2% of their body weight per day as digestible fibre is the basic requirement in a horse's diet. For a 500 kg horse this is 7.5 – 10 kg of grass, hay or chaff per day. Additionally, protein, fats, vitamins, and minerals are required. Fortunately, good quality hay contains many of these nutrients and we can add other more concentrated feeds to increase fat, protein and carbohydrates if needed, when horses are in work.

### A basic diet

The standard maintenance feed in our hospital is a biscuit of lucerne hay (about 2 kg) three times a day plus 2 kg of lucerne chaff twice daily plus 2 kg of a maintenance pelleted feed. This allows a 450-500 kg horse to maintain it's body weight, and we modify the diet to add fibre and energy depending on the horse's needs. For example, lactating mares feeding a foal need more energy than a working horse. Therefore, mares with a foal at foot get **double** the quantity of feed, to **maintain** their body weight.

For a horse in the paddock a mixture of lucerne and Rhode's grass hay – a biscuit of each 2-3 times a day, plus 1-2 kg of a pelleted feed twice daily, along with what they graze in the paddock should work well. If the horse is in work, increase the amount of pellets or concentrate **on the days the horse is worked** i.e. when it needs more energy.

Horses have evolved to graze constantly throughout the day so dividing feeds up into smaller amounts 2-3 times a day helps maintain a healthy gastrointestinal function.

### Too thin?

If your horse is thin (BCS of 3 or less) it may need more good quality feed. A common misconception is adding in more concentrate, where the horse may benefit from more roughage. Ensuring that your horse has enough good quality hay is a great start to helping your horse gain weight. If your horse is losing weight and has access to plenty of high-quality feed, then please contact us. There may be an underlying health problem for weight loss in this case.

## Too fat?

If your horses, and particularly ponies, are always fat (BCS 6 or greater), even when there's not much grass they can just be good at metabolizing feed and storing the energy as fat. This can become a problem if they develop Equine metabolic syndrome where insulin is maintained at abnormally high levels to regulate blood glucose in the normal range. These horses are at increased risk of developing laminitis, especially when exposed to green growing grass (particularly in the wet season!). This is especially important during the day, while the plants are photosynthesizing, as the grasses will have a higher sugar content. This can be a risk for normal horses, especially those on high grain diets and that are overweight.



If you think your horse may have laminitis, has recently become reluctant to walk or has a short shuffling gait, please contact your veterinarian. We can advise you on treatment and preventative measures to minimize further episodes.

It can be difficult to maintain your horse at an appropriate weight. However, we are here to provide advice and support. If you have any questions or would like a visit, please contact Townsville Vet Clinic on 47790233.