

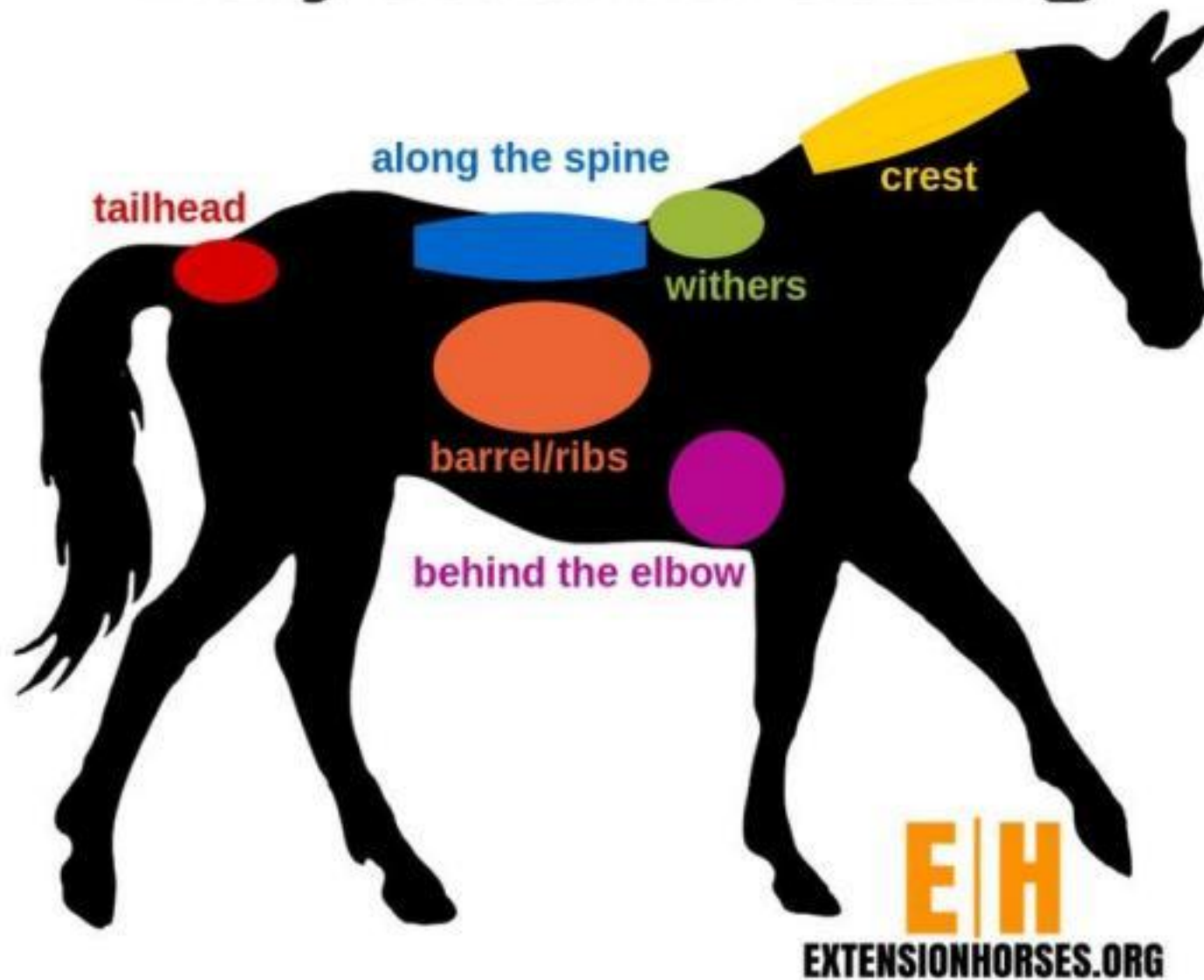


TWO WAYS TO WEIGH A HORSE AT HOME

by Stacie G. Boswell, DVM, DACVS

Montana winters are tough for horses. As we learned in last month's article, they have quite a few physiologic strategies for staying warm. One of the things a horse needs to stay warm is adequate fat coverage, which can be difficult to see under a horse's thick winter coat. This month we will talk about weight monitoring and next month we will talk more specifically about feeding strategies for thin horses or hard keepers.

Six Areas of Focus for Equine Body Condition Scoring



Of course, in a perfect world, if we are monitoring a horse's weight, we would simply weigh him. However, that's obviously not feasible – you cannot just stand him on your bathroom scale! There are two main ways to practically monitor a horse's weight: body condition scoring (BCS) and weight taping.

A body condition score (BCS) is a method for tracking the fat coverage and condition of animals when a scale is impractical or unavailable. It's been used for over 30 years and has stood up in multiple court cases of neglect across the country. To BCS a horse, fat is evaluated over 6 areas of his body: crest/neck, withers, spine/loin, behind the elbow, barrel/ribs, and tailhead. A scale from 1-9 is applied in each area, then the average is calculated. In the winter, with a thick hair coat, it's hard to tell fat coverage vs. fur coverage, so a horse must be felt and palpated and not just visually observed.

A BCS of 1 is extremely emaciated, and the animal has almost no body fat, with his spine and bones showing clearly. A BCS of 5 is moderate or ideal and the animal has just the right amount of fat coverage and is round over his spine and rump. Finally, a BCS of 9 is a very obese, and the horse will have patches of fat and an obvious crease down his spine and rump. A 700-pound pony is very different from a 700-pound Quarter Horse. Describing a horse by his weight alone doesn't give a clear picture. But, if you say that a horse has a BCS of 2, that's a clear mental image of his condition.

Weight taping is another way to estimate a horse's weight. For most horses, a weight tape gives an excellent weight estimate. They are useful for monitoring trends of the condition of an individual horse at home. A change in BCS score on a horse can have a range of 35-50 lbs or so; weight taping will catch trends sooner. To use a weight tape, it should be placed around the horse's barrel just behind his elbow and perpendicular to the ground.



clockwise from top left:

areas of the body evaluated for fat coverage when Body Condition Scoring a horse



proper placement of a weight tape for monitoring

this horse has a weight of 1190, based on the number lined up with the tape (it's just underneath the metal marker)

When we are working to help a horse either gain or lose weight, I advocate using a weight tape weekly and recording the number. It seems like we can be pouring feed to one, and it's hard to tell we are making a difference, but again, the weight tape will catch the trend before our eye does. Knowing we are making progress prevents us from feeling discouraged. If a horse is stable, it's still important to monitor him regularly - once monthly is reasonable - so that he doesn't gradually gain or lose condition unnoticed.

With weight monitoring through body condition scoring and weight tapes, we can adjust a horse's feeding and exercise regimen for ideal health. These tools help us get horses through our frigid winters with enough fat to stay warm and comfortable.

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