

# Spotting the troubled horse.

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Welcome to Spotting the Troubled Horse. At the end of this session, I hope that you will be able to spot if a horse is experiencing good or bad welfare. I have also provided you with the contact details throughout this information on what to do if you think a horse you are assessing is experiencing poor welfare.

## “More is missed by not looking than by not knowing.

Thomas McCrae, 1870-1935

- Body condition
  - Thin
  - Fat
- Pain:
  - Lameness
  - Wounds
  - Feet
  - Eyes
  - Acute disease
  - Chronic disease
- Housing
  - Exercise
  - Fencing and shelter
  - Social



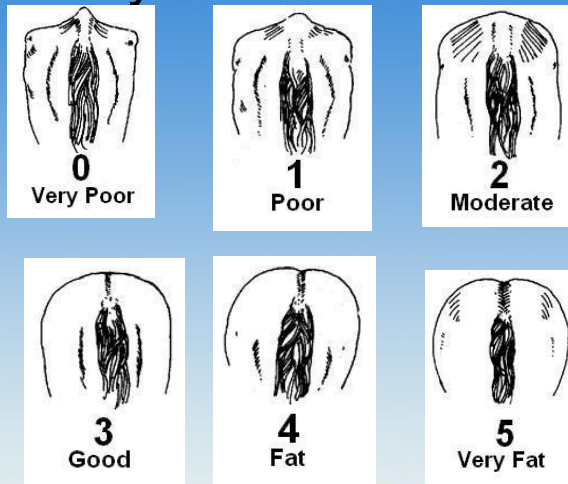
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In this presentation we are going to work through what you need to be on the lookout for when you see a horse that is potentially in trouble. Once you get your eye in it is possible to see potential problems just as you drive past. Just be aware that you are seeing a moment in time and there is always more to the story. This is where Project Hope comes in. The organisation has a system for investigating and providing assistance to horses AND their carers. All we ask for is that if you spot a horse that you think *might* be in trouble that you report it through our system. Please see <https://www.phhvv.org.au/report-a-horse/> or call 1300 881 606.

## Body Condition Score – Rump



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One of the most common reports Project Hope gets is around body condition scores – either too thin or too fat.

Body condition describes how much weight a horse is carrying and can be a good measure of the overall health of the horse.

A healthy horse will have good (even) **muscling** on its upper legs, rump, back and neck. You should be able to feel the ribs and, maybe, see up to three ribs when the horse breathes in.

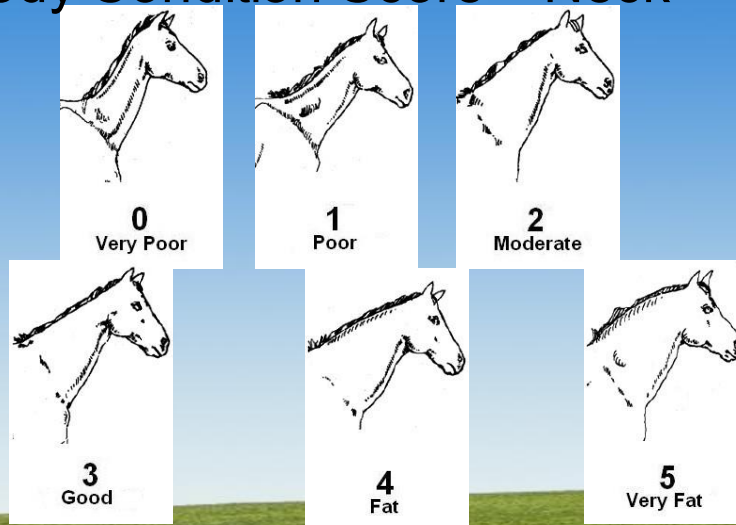
There should be no fat pads visible.

Use the PHHW method

Divide the horse into three equal parts then score each part separately and divide by three. This is very important for spotting Equine metabolic syndrome horses.

If you want to get better at this valuable skill please consider doing the PHHW representative training. It is excellent.

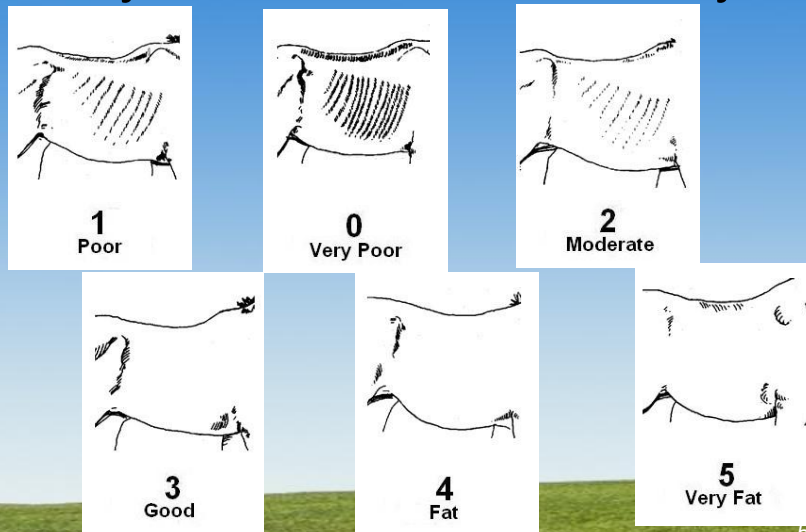
## Body Condition Score – Neck



4 4

While thin horses are undoubtedly a horse welfare issue the reality is that there are many more horses that are experiencing a poor quality of life because they are carrying too much condition. Please see the Welfare Guide to Managing the Fat Horse for more information.  
[https://www.phhvv.org.au/media/website\\_pages/Proposal-JAG-Creations-2021.pdf](https://www.phhvv.org.au/media/website_pages/Proposal-JAG-Creations-2021.pdf)

## Body Condition Score – Body



55

Don't underestimate the importance of looking at the ribs. In many horses, especially western breeds, at body condition score 3 you will see 3 – 4 rib outlines when they breathe out. More than that is starting to be questionable. That said, horses that are being managed for equine metabolic syndrome will often be kept at a Body Condition Score of 2 for their health. The other thing to look for is the FAT PADS. The presence of fat pads is a better predictor of poor health arising out of equine metabolic syndrome than overall body condition score!

## Thin Horses

- Horses with Body Condition Score (BCS) of 1 or less are an emergency
- Horses with BCS under 2 but greater than 1 are in trouble and need management



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BCS < 1 cannot just be fed. They need to be rehabilitated with careful feeding. Project Hope can also help with this process.

Check out the fencing and state of the ground in this picture. This horse is in trouble. This situation is not uncommon on small peri-urban properties. People who are naïve to the needs of horses think that 1 – 2 acres is enough to keep a horse on... and of course, the spotty ones are so cute....

## Fat horses

- Horses with BCS >3.5 are at risk of laminitis and metabolic diseases
- They need immediate and careful management
- DO NOT STARVE overweight horses – it can kill them



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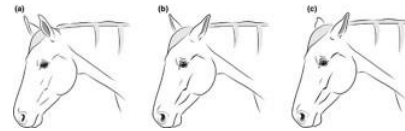
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Please see [https://www.phhvv.org.au/media/website\\_pages/Proposal-JAG-Creations-2021.pdf](https://www.phhvv.org.au/media/website_pages/Proposal-JAG-Creations-2021.pdf) for more information on how to manage overweight horses.

## Pain

- Horses are prey animals so they hide their pain
- Pain will be detectable by:
  - Facial expression and posture
  - Lack of activity
  - Isolation
  - Changes in movement
  - Reluctance to eat or drink



a) Facial expression of a pain free, relaxed and attentive horse (Ill. Andrea Klintbjer). (b) Facial expression of a horse in pain, comprising all features of the pain face including asymmetrical ears (Ill. Andrea Klintbjer). (c) Facial expression of a horse in pain, comprising all features of the pain face including low ears (Ill. Andrea Klintbjer).

Gierup, K. B. Forkman, B., Lindegaard C., & Andersen, P. H. (2015). An equine pain ~~veterinary~~ anaesthesia and analgesia#2(1), 103-114.

[https://www.horsesandpeople.com.au/sites/default/files/fact\\_sheets/Equine\\_Face\\_Poster.pdf](https://www.horsesandpeople.com.au/sites/default/files/fact_sheets/Equine_Face_Poster.pdf)



<https://www.holisticanimalstudies.org/blog/when-tell-if-your-horse-is-in-pain>

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There is has been a lot of work on using horse grimace scales to recognise horses experiencing pain. Remember as prey animals, horses only show subtle signs of pain. Please see: <https://horsesandpeople.com.au/the-equine-pain-face/>  
<https://horsesandpeople.com.au/learn-to-recognise-the-subtle-signs-of-pain/>



# Lameness

- Abnormalities in movement.
- Anything above 1/5 lame needs immediate attention
- Holding a leg up is an EMERGENCY (non weight bearing lame)
- Sawhorse stance is an emergency
- <https://www.lamenesstrainer.com/>



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Watch the following to get your eye in:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78QY6CS7t3s&ab\\_channel=DavidBolt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78QY6CS7t3s&ab_channel=DavidBolt)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDodRfghjuc&ab\\_channel=DavidBolt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDodRfghjuc&ab_channel=DavidBolt)

Want more? <https://www.lamenesstrainer.com/>

Images Credits:

Sawhorse – laminitis or tetanus

By Ealdgyth - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=12302814>

Chronic lameness = upright foot

Bowed tendons By Vet Moves.com - Flickr: Bowed Tendons #2, CC BY 2.0,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15999655>

## Water

- Availability
- Hygiene
- Contaminants
- Containers must be solid



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The Victorian Code of practice around keeping horses requires water containers to be of a sort that cannot be readily tipped over.

Provision of water has been a long-standing welfare issue for horses.

Bills horse troughs are watering troughs that were manufactured in Australia and installed to provide relief for working horses in the first half of the twentieth century. The troughs were financed by a trust fund established through the will of George Bills. A total of around 700 troughs were distributed by the trust in Australia and 50 in several other countries.

# Housing

- Type
- Space
- Shelter
- Fencing
  - Type of fencing
  - Condition of fencing
- Gates
  - Width
  - Type
  - Condition
  - Ground conditions



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Space: If the horse is housed in a dry lot then there should be the equivalent of one third of a dressage arena for each horse (i.e. 20 m x 20 m). There dry lot should have enough room so that horses can escape any other horse housed in the same space  
Note if there are electric standoffs to keep horses off wire fences the electricity must be on!

Images:

By Ra Boe - selbst fotografiert DigiCam C2100UZ, CC BY-SA 2.5,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=833594>

Horse on paddock trail with electric stand offs on wire fences ©Dr Lesley Hawson

By Montanabw - Own work, Public Domain,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4393997>

## Paddock condition

- Grass cover
  - Bare patches
  - Species variety
  - Weeds
  - Mud
- Shelter
  - Type
  - Condition
  - Use



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Obviously, the horse in the bottom picture is an emergency and needs to be addressed immediately. I strongly urge you to ring the Project Hope hotline immediately if you see

horses in these types of conditions: **1300 881 606.**

**Images:**

<https://www.envirapest.com.au/pasture-weed-management-revitalise-block/>

<https://horseauthority.co/horses-in-knee-deep-mud-feces-leads-to-abuse-investigation/>

## Supplementary feeding

- Necessary?
- Evidence?
- Type?
- Sufficient forage?
- I recommend FEED XL
  - <https://feedxl.com/>



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All horses should have supplementary vitamins and minerals – so supplementary feeding is mandatory.

1.5% to 2% of ideal bodyweight ration should be forage. This is a LOT more than you think it is. Please always WEIGH your forage. See Managing the Fat Horse for more information.

This pony has a body condition consistent with Equine Metabolic Disease.

Look at the fencing, ringlock. The grass is very short and will be stressed. This means it will be high in non-structural carbohydrates (sugar). This is a potential death sentence for this horse if it is not carefully managed.

## Eyes

- Any abnormality in an eye is an emergency

- Swelling
- Squinting
- Discharge
- Cloudiness
- Third eyelid visible
- Horse rubbing eye repeatedly
- Flies
- Pain face



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Eyes can go from nothing to disastrous within hours. Disastrous can mean not only losing the affected eye but also, in worse case scenarios, the other eye.

Do not hesitate. Get the vet. Or call: **1300 881 606**



## Wounds

- Blood anywhere on a horse is an emergency
- Any swelling is of concern especially if the horse is also LAME
- If the wound has scabbed over and the horse is not lame try to find out if the horse is being managed
- Always offer assistance



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This is a picture of one of my horses. She fractured her lateral splint bone and cut her extensor tendon because of a mysterious paddock accident on Boxing Day. She was only mildly lame for a few days. I was back riding her by March. Wounds can look terrible and not result in any ongoing damage OR they can be tiny and be life threatening. It just depends on where they are, how deep they go and what structures are affected. Always get the vet out to explore and treat wounds. And don't forget tetanus prophylaxis.

# Hooves

- Overgrown
- Cracks
- Smelly
- Discharge
  - Check underneath if you can
- Growth abnormalities
- LAMINITIC
- **Hooves need trimming ideally every FOUR – SIX weeks**



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Horses suffer a lot through their feet. Many lameness events start in the feet. Environmental conditions and metabolic ill health show up in the feet. Always check the soles of any horse you are worried about if it safe to do so.



## Gut

- Gastric ulcers
- Worms
- Teeth **look in mouth**
- Colic
- Sand



By Ilinia Gail - originally posted to Flickr as Wild Horses of the Outer Banks, CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6304545>



By extensionhoiser ascarid1, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=36728565>



<https://www.vetx.com/index.php?threads/equineodontoclastic-tooth-resorption-and-hypercementosis-histopathologic-features.2534/>

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Parasitism: classic rounded belly with reduced topline. These horses can often look to be in good condition. Be aware that horses can carry internal parasite damage from when they were foals. This will shorten their life span.

Gastric ulcers, and sand (especially if in a low forage situation) cause poor welfare. Horses on pasture can still suffer gastric ulcers.

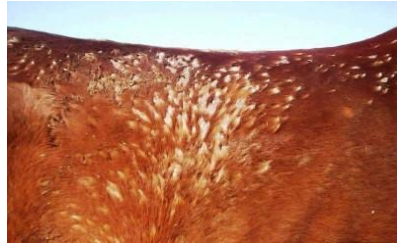
Dental disease is common in older horses. Horses will still eat with fractured teeth, tooth root abscesses and even fractured jaws.

Equine Odontoclastic Tooth Resorption and Hypercementosis, also known as **EOTRH**, is a syndrome in horses that results in resorptive lesions of the incisors and sometimes canine teeth. It is common in older horses (15+), though it is occasionally picked up in younger teenage horses. EOTRH can often be the cause of poor body condition. It is usually gradual in onset, so it often isn't diagnosed until quite extensive lesions are present. While this syndrome has probably existed for many years, it has only recently been properly identified and named. Diagnosis is typically made through radiographs of the incisors. This is the only way to know definitively how many teeth are affected, and how severe the lesions are. Unfortunately, the only treatment is complete excision of all affected teeth.

## Skin

- NOT usually life threatening but major welfare issue:

- Rain Scald (fungal +/- bacterial)
- Ringworm (fungal)
- Mud fever/Greasy heel (pastern dermatitis)
- Mites
- Lice
- Mange
- Allergy
- Cancer (includes sarcoids, melanoma)



<https://franklinvets.co.nz/2018/10/26/parasitallenges/>  
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Skin disease can also be a warning signal that the welfare of the horse is not optimal. That said, some skin diseases such as sweet itch (QLD itch) appears to have a genetic component as well.

# Freedom

- Insufficient freedom:
  - Horses need movement for:
    - Circulatory health (blood and lymph are pumped by muscle action back to heart)
    - Hoof needs to expand and contract to push fluid back into circulation
    - Swollen legs (filling) indicate lack of movement
    - Post inhibitory rebound can cause injuries
  - Hoof and skin disease– fungal and bacterial



<https://onthewright.com/itsban-for-woman-who-neglected-care-of-horses-for-osborne-house/> Accessed 11/01/2021



Being kept in a stable or yard 24/7 IS a welfare issue.

Look at the surfaces the horse is living on. Piles of manure, wet bedding, tracks along the fences all suggest sub optimal welfare. Again the hooves will often tell the story here.

## Tethering and hobbling

- Legal but not recommended
- Tether radius must be 9m and made of chain
- Hobbles must have quick release capacity
- Water must be in trough or heavy container
- Shelter and feed
- Must be checked 2– 3 times a day
- Exercised daily (hobbled no more than 12 hours a day)



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I was that kid who had her pony tethered all over the neighbourhood vacant lots. In retrospect it was not adequate. It is hard for a tethered horse to have a life worth living.

Please see <https://agriculture.vic.gov.au/livestock-and-animals/animal-welfare-victoria/pocta-act-1986/victorian-codes-of-practice-for-animal-welfare/code-of-practice-for-the-tethering-of-animals-revision-2>

## Friends

- Horses need **compatible** company to be able to express normal behaviours
- The lone horse is an at risk horse
- Incompatible company e.g. mares with mature colts
- Too many horses
  - fixed stocking limit is about one horse per 2 acres on “good pasture”
  - Paddock management systems such as Equiculture, Paddock Paradise or strip grazing is better for land and horses



By Nokota\_Horses.jpg: François Marchal/derivative work: Dana boomer (talk) Nokota\_Horses.jpg, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=9456234>

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Be wary of “fixed stocking”. The country I live on now would be lucky to carry a horse per 5 acres while around Kilmore it is more like one horse per 1 acre during Spring. Ironically my horses are far healthier on the “poor country” because the grass has low non-structural carbohydrates, and the horses must move more to get water and food.

## Equipment



- Halters left on

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2gPvyLX594&t=104s&ab\\_channel=WorldHorseWelfare](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2gPvyLX594&t=104s&ab_channel=WorldHorseWelfare)



- Rugs
  - horses MUST be checked daily



<https://www.horseworld.org.uk/latestnews/horses-rescued-with-horrific-injuries-caused-by-his-own-rug/>

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This is a picture of a horse that had its rug left on for a considerable period of time without being checked. Unfortunately, the rug did not fit and caused massive pressure sores. Please always check under the rug of any horse you are concerned about.

I am not a fan of rugs unless they are absolutely necessary. Necessary means the horse has inadequate shelter from wind and rain and/or cannot move around enough to keep warm. In overweight horses, rugs can lead to insulin dysregulation that ultimately leads to insulin resistance and equine metabolic disease. That said, rugs do have their place – especially on horses that lose weight below BCS of 2 in cold weather. This can be the case with Thoroughbreds and Arabs which do have greater heat loss. Be very careful rugging horses that are thin as they will develop pressure sores on the bony protuberances.

Horses that get hot under their rugs will sweat. Horses sweat much more concentrated sweat than we do. This means they lose a lot of electrolytes from their sweat. Please make sure the horse is being provided sufficient salt (good old sodium chloride) if rugged.

## Signs of ACUTE trouble:

- Horse down
- Single horse separated from the rest of the mob
- Horse not moving over 2 hour period
- Horse not bright, alert and interacting with the environment
- Strange gait or stance
- Blood or discharge on or from the horse
- Diarrhoea
- High pain face score
- Broken fences/gates
- No water



Pain Face: 0

Pain Face: 2

Face to the right: dilation of nostrils, ears back, contracted/tense facial muscles

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4312484/>



If it doesn't look right, then it probably is not right.



## Signs of chronic trouble

All of the previous slide **PLUS**

- Wrong number of ribs visible
- Bad feet
- Insufficient water or feed
- Inadequate fencing
- Inadequate supervision
- Inadequate shelter
- Inadequate footing



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Chronic trouble can be harder to spot. You might have to take in the whole environment to evaluate if the horse is in trouble. Remember to look at the ground, the fences, the shelter as well as the horse.

This little one is in trouble – it is grazing manure contaminated short, stressed grass that is anathema for its obese state.



Thanks for listening.

“When you know  
better you can  
**CHOOSE**  
to do better. “

With apologies to Maya Angelou.

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