

Policy Statement



Policy Title: Rider Weight

Number: RiderWeight06.17V2

Functional Area: Welfare

Brief Description:	Rider weight guidance and calculation
Effective:	January 2017
Approved by:	Welfare Department
Responsible Department:	Policy
Policy Contact:	anne.skivington@bhs.org.uk
Supersedes:	N/A
Last Reviewed/Updated:	January 2018
Applies to:	Provides guidance for horse owners and riders

Reason for Policy: To provide support for riding establishments and riders/ owners

I. INTRODUCTION

The policy of the BHS regarding rider weight is clear:

1. No horse should be asked to carry more weight than it is comfortably able. Failure to adhere to this is a breach of welfare and may cause long term physiological damage to the animal.
2. Horse riding is an inclusive sport and has many physical and health benefits to the rider. There is a suitable horse for almost everyone that is within a healthy weight range for their height. However the particular horse must be chosen carefully to reflect the rider's ability and riders must accept that there are some horses that are not sufficiently robust to carry them safely. Some riding establishments may not have horses large enough to carry riders over a certain weight and in these circumstances a rider will need to look elsewhere for riding opportunities.

II. POLICY STATEMENT

The question of precisely how much weight an individual horse can safely carry is regularly asked of The British Horse Society. Unfortunately there is a dearth of robust and reliable peer-reviewed research on the subject and therefore it is not possible for the BHS to produce a definitive figure. However, this document sets out the recommendations of the Society and will be reviewed and revised as research develops.

In simple terms and in most circumstances the BHS recommends that a horse or pony is regularly asked to carry no more than:

- 10% of its ideal bodyweight if performing at an extremely high intensity (e.g. elite competition)
- 18% of its ideal bodyweight in other circumstances

These figures are not inclusive of the horse's tack and allowances should be made if the horse is required to wear unusually heavy tack.

It is vital that these calculations are based on ideal rather than actual bodyweight of the horse. A horse that is significantly overweight will not be sufficiently fit to carry 15% of its obese bodyweight. A horse that is significantly underweight should not be ridden.

There are however a number of factors that must be taken into consideration when determining the maximum weight that a horse should be asked to carry. These include but are not limited to:

Age of horse. Young horses may not have developed sufficient balance and musculature to carry a full 18% of their ideal bodyweight. It is not possible to prescribe weight limits according to the age of the horse as fitness and experience are equally important. Additionally cold-blooded breeds (such as the Irish Draught) will tend to mature more slowly than warm and hot-blooded breeds such as the Thoroughbred.

Elderly horses should also not be expected to carry a full 18% of their ideal bodyweight due to the effects of age and wear and tear on the body. The age at which a horse should be considered as elderly will vary with the fitness of the horse in question.

Breed of horse. Certain breeds of horse have been bred specifically to carry weight. The Highland Pony, as an example, was in part developed in order to transport heavy deer carcasses at a slow and steady pace. It would be therefore realistic to expect horses of this type to carry more than the recommended limit of 18% of ideal bodyweight assuming that there are no confounding factors and the horse is working at a slow pace.

Conformation of horse. The conformation of a horse's back is particularly important in determining the maximum weight it can carry. Irregularities in the shape of the spine such as sway backs and pronounced withers (particularly common in older horses) mechanically weaken the spine and limit weight carrying capacity. There are many conformational and postural faults that may affect a horse's weight carrying ability and these are not restricted to the back. Limb deformity may also be an issue and if there is any concern about a horse's conformation the advice of an expert should be sought.

Horse fitness. A horse may be at its ideal weight but this does not mean that it is physically fit. Likewise a horse may be frequently ridden but if that riding consists primarily of low intensity work it will not be at peak fitness. An unfit horse should not be asked to carry as much weight as one that has, through controlled and regular exercise, developed the musculature of the fit horse.

Type, frequency and duration of work to be undertaken. It is important to consider whether it is fair to expect a horse to carry its maximum load on a very regular basis particularly if it is working at a high intensity or for long periods of time. Particular consideration should be given in the case of a novice or inexperienced rider. It is recommended that when purchasing a horse an individual should seek to buy one that is capable of carrying more than the individual weights. Riding schools should ensure that their horses are not consistently working at the limit of their weight carrying abilities.

The frequency and intensity of the work expected of horses working at exceptionally high levels, elite competition horses, and means that they should carry only 10% of their ideal bodyweight.

Rider ability. A beginner or novice rider is unlikely to have developed sufficient balance and skill to prevent them from moving around in the saddle. This will have a negative impact on the horse's spine. With experience come balance and poise which eases the burden on the horse. It is likely to be that a horse will find a 12 stone/ 76 Kg well-balanced experienced rider easier to carry than a 10st/ 63.5Kg novice who does not yet have the skills to remain stable in the saddle.

A common issue with learner riders is the tendency to lean forwards. The horse carries 60% of its bodyweight on its forelimbs (in part due to the length of neck) so the addition of weight from an unbalanced rider is not conducive to the long term integrity of the forelimb structures.

It is recognised that every rider needs to learn but it is suggested that until they have a secure seat they are restricted to horses for whom the rider's weight equates to less than 18% of the horse's bodyweight.

In the absence of robust peer-reviewed research the determination of the maximum weight that a horse can carry remains subjective rather than based in science. In instances where maximum weight carrying ability is in doubt expert advice should be sought. BHS Accredited Professional Coaches will be able to offer impartial and honest guidance.

The British Horse Society firmly believes that almost everyone can find a horse that can carry them safely. Riders who weigh more may need to invest some time and effort in finding a horse that will meet their needs. Under no circumstances should the welfare of a horse be compromised by the weight of its rider. There will be occasions when BHS Approved Riding Schools will not be able to accommodate clients due to their weight. The BHS supports the schools' decisions but will be happy to assist riders to find an approved riding school that does meet their needs.

III. DEFINITIONS

Over weight horse – a horse with a body condition score of more than 2.5

Young horse – a horse in the early stages of training up to approximately 8 years old

Aged horse – 16+ years old

IV. RELATED POLICIES, PROCEDURES, FORMS, GUIDELINES, AND OTHER RESOURCES

A. Related policies - N/A

B. Procedures – N/A

C. Forms – N/A

D. Guidelines - Condition scoring leaflet available <http://www.bhs.org.uk/welfare-and-care/free-leaflets>

E. Other Resources

F. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Am I the right weight to ride my horse?

Does this include the weight of the tack?
Is there anything else I should take into consideration?

V. **HISTORY**

This is the first rider weight document created by the BHS