

Don't overlook your cow's body condition score

Aidan Murray, Drystock specialist, Teagasc Animal and Grassland Research & Innovation Programme.

It's people rather than cattle which come to mind when you hear body condition scoring (BCS) mentioned these days. Human nutritionists refer to body mass index (BMI) as the way to measure our individual condition.

A growing fraction of the population are categorised as obese on the human grid and many work hard to lose their unwanted kilos.

The condition of suckler cows also fluctuates. Suckling, originally begun in marginal land areas where the goal was to calve cows to grass, allows them to build up body condition and get them back in calf over the summer. House them at the end of the season in good condition, allow them to lose some of this condition over the winter months and calve them down, fit and healthy. Then the cycle would begin all over again.

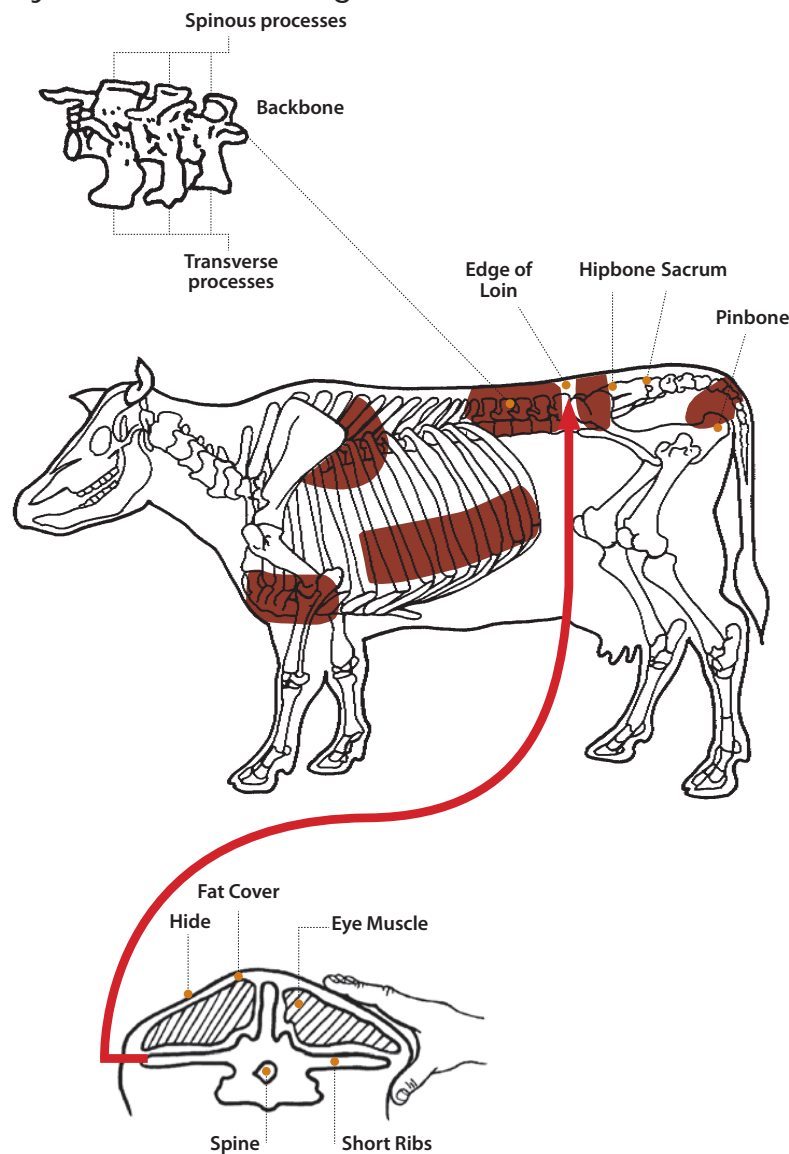
Principles

It is important that we are reminded of these principles this winter, in particular, as some farms face the winter with tight fodder supplies where rationing may be needed.

Other farms have cows coming in in excellent condition and with an abundance of fodder. Either way, cows calving down too thin will give as much trouble as those calving down too fat and the consequences don't stop at calving.

Body condition scoring is a good method of assessing body fat levels in cows and it is one of the most important factors in determining reproductive performance.

Body condition scoring

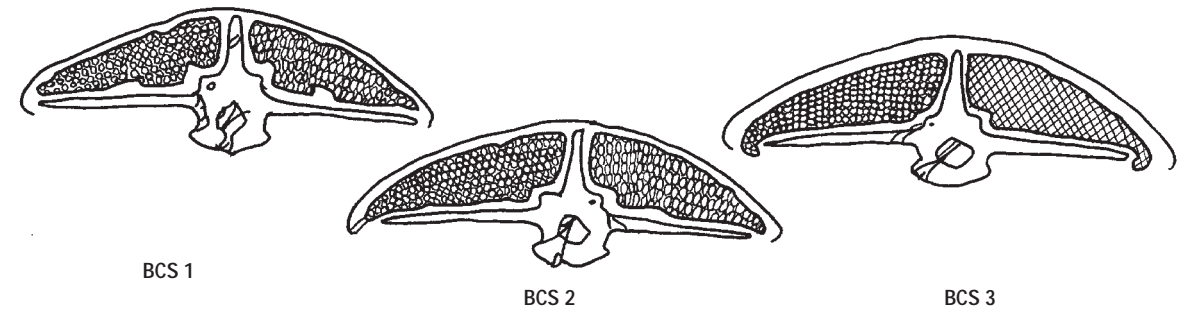


When it comes to assessing body condition score, we usually follow the Scottish method, where animals will fall into categories 0 to 5 as listed on page 13.

Animals are assessed by feeling the level of fat cover along the edge of

the loin and around the tail head. You can also place the palm of your hand along the ribs and, using your fingers, assess fat cover.

It is important to remember that it is fat cover you are assessing and not muscle mass.



Score 0
Emaciated.

Score 1
Individual spinous/transverse processes fairly sharp to the touch and no fat around tail head. Hip bones, tail head and ribs visually prominent.

Score 2
Spinous/transverse processes identified individually when touched, but feel rounded rather than sharp. Some tissue cover around tail head and over hip bones. Individual ribs no longer obvious.

Score 3
Spinous/transverse processes can only be felt with firm pressure. Areas either side of tail head have fat cover that is felt easily.

Score 4
Fat cover around tail head evident as slight rounds, soft to touch. Spinous/transverse processes cannot be felt, even with firm pressure. Folds of fat developing over ribs.

Score 5
Bone structure no longer noticeable and animal presents a blocky appearance. Tail head and hip bones almost completely buried in fat, folds of fat are apparent over ribs. Spinous/transverse processes are completely covered by fat, the animal's mobility is impaired.

When should you condition score?

As a minimum, cows should be condition-scored three times in the year.

• **I. Housing/weaning:** Many spring-calving cows will be housed over the next few weeks. It is an ideal time to check condition, because it will identify cows that need to gain condition (BCS<2.5) prior to calving. This period will often coincide with cows being weaned and thinner cows that are dried off will be given every chance to build condition even on good-quality silage.

These thinner animals should ideally be grouped together if they are to get preferential treatment. Equally, overfat cows (BCS 4 to 5) can be thinned down over a more prolonged period if they are identified early. Research has shown that allowing an overfat cow to reduce condition score by 0.7 will save the equivalent of 1.5t of fresh silage.

• **II. Pre-calving:** The reason to condition score again in the two to three months before calving is to make sure that cows will calve down in the 2.5 to 3.0 range. If they calve down too thin (<BCS 2), you can run into issues of increased calving difficulty, poor calf vigour and delayed return to oestrus after calving.

Scoring animals at this time will also flag up cows that may have lost extra condition because they may have a parasite burden or be carrying

Table 1: Target body condition scores

	Spring-calving herds	Autumn-calving herds
Calving	2.5-3.0	3.0
Breeding	2.5-3.0	2.5-3.0
Housing	3.0-3.5	3.0

twins, etc. Older cows, heifers and first calvers will be most vulnerable if feed space is limited; cows that become lame can often lose condition rapidly.

• **III. Breeding:** After calving, if cows are to remain indoors for longer than two to three weeks, thin cows and first calvers should be grouped and supplemented to at least maintain condition and ideally be on a rising plane of nutrition. Cows should be gaining condition right through the breeding season.

Thin cows will be slower to resume oestrus and, if your system is to be efficient, then cows need to be bred and back in calf within 10 to 12 weeks of calving, which is a tight target to achieve if cows are in poor condition.

As Table 1 shows, cows should ideally be fluctuating in the BCS range 2.5 to 3.5 throughout the year. Falling outside this range means that there are times of the year that your cows are too thin or overfat.

Summary

- Condition score cows now at housing and group accordingly if cows are thin or overfat, so that feeding can be targeted.
- There is a danger this winter, where forage supplies are tight, that if adequate feed space is not available, then some individual cows will lose excessive condition pre-calving. Young cows and older cows will be most at risk.
- Make sure that cows are well covered against parasites, such as fluke, and treated for lice at housing. It is another factor that will draw nutrients away from preserving body condition.
- Where meals are being used to supplement scarce fodder supplies, feed space is critical if animals are to maintain condition. If, in the six weeks pre-calving, you feel cows are gaining excessive condition (3+ BCS), you may need to ease back to avoid calving issues.
- Some cows will be out-wintered on forage. Even with the correct minerals and forage allocation, cow condition should be monitored closely. Some cows during prolonged wet periods on these crops may lose quite a lot of condition and then have to be housed.