



Horse and Rider Weight Guidance

Core Principle

- The **maximum combined rider + tack weight** should not exceed **20% of the horse's bodyweight**.
- This figure is a **ceiling, not a target**. In most cases, the safe limit will be lower once welfare, rider skill and environmental factors are considered.

Why 20%?

- Research shows that **>20% BW** is consistently linked to:
 - Higher heart rate, lactate, and body temperature (Powell 2008; Munjizun 2023).
 - Gait changes, reduced stride length, and asymmetry (Matsuura 2012–17; Gunnarsson 2017).
 - Temporary lameness and behaviours consistent with musculoskeletal pain (Dyson 2019).
- Some horses tolerate loads up to 25% without short-term changes (Christensen 2020), but **welfare risks increase significantly beyond 20%**.
- Therefore, **20% is the maximum permissible load**, with reductions applied where risk factors exist.

Factors That Reduce the Maximum Weight

Factor	Why It Matters	Adjustment
Horse conformation & muscling	Narrow loins, fine bone, weak topline reduce tolerance.	Reduce limit by 2–5%.
Age & health	Older horses, arthritis, or orthopaedic injuries reduce capacity.	Reduce limit by 5–10%.
Body condition score (BCS)	Overweight horses carry excess internal load; apparent BW is misleading.	If the BCS is higher than 'Good', base calculation on <i>ideal</i> weight, not actual.

Factor	Why It Matters	Adjustment
Rider skill & balance	Unbalanced/inexperienced riders increase strain.	Add up to 10% to rider's effective weight.
Tack fit & distribution	Poor saddle fit or uneven load increases discomfort.	Reduce limit until corrected.
Workload & environment	Fast work, long duration, hard/uneven terrain, extreme weather increase strain.	Reduce limit by 5–10%.

Practical Calculation

1. **Weigh the horse** (scales or girth × length ÷ 11,880).
2. **Set 20% BW** as the maximum combined rider + tack weight.
3. **Deduct tack weight** (~10 kg average).
4. **Apply reductions** for horse age, conformation, injuries, workload, or environment.
5. **Adjust rider weight for rider skill** (+0–10%).
6. **Record the agreed maximum rider weight** on the Horse Assessment Form.

Policy Application

- **Routine work:** Aim for ≤15–18% BW.
- **Shows/competitions:** Never exceed 20% BW.
- **Inspection readiness:** Document horse-specific limits, tack weight, and rider adjustments.
- **Communication:** Discuss sensitively with riders and parents, emphasising welfare and fairness.

Conclusion

Weight can be a sensitive subject, but it is crucial that you consider what weight the horse or pony can reasonably be asked to carry. This includes the weight of the tack and equipment, as well as the rider. The ABRS+ recommend:

- **20% BW is the ceiling;** most horses should carry less.
- Welfare-first adjustments ensure horses remain sound, comfortable, and fit for purpose.
- Rider wellbeing is important, but **equine welfare must always be prioritised.**

- Regular reviews and clear documentation protect horses, riders, and establishments.

The guidance will be amended as more evidence-based information becomes available.