

Winter Care for your Horse

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As temperatures drop, horse owners should begin to make changes in their horse's program in preparation for winter. But what alterations are needed? Here are some points to consider when preparing to adjust a program for the colder weather.

Forage

The most common way to provide forage to a horse is by supplying them with hay. Depending on the type (grass or legume) and harvest time, hay can provide a significant amount of a horse's daily nutritional needs. In addition, hay provides the horse with the required fiber for hindgut health. Additionally, there are many benefits to fiber in the winter besides providing nutrients. The heat created by hay digestion is greater than the heat of digestion from concentrates, which means that horses are able to save energy needed to produce body heat by consuming hay. In short, if they are eating or digesting hay, they are warm.

Monitor Body Condition

Aim to monitor a horse's body condition score every couple weeks leading up to and during the winter months. Longer, thicker hair coats can be deceiving of the horse's actual condition, so additional feed might be needed to maintain his weight during the colder months. If your horse wears a blanket you should remove it regularly to check for sores, rubbing, and rips. If you see your horse every day and don't know if they are getting fat or skinny, is to snap a picture of your horse monthly, that way you can notice the difference in their body condition. If a horse is over conditioned, reduce the amount of calories from grain before reducing forage amounts. If the horse is under conditioned, increase the amount of forage he consumes or change to a more nutritious type of forage. Additional calories from concentrates and/or fat sources might be needed to help a hard keeper maintain his weight.

Water

A horse will not stay properly hydrated if his water is frozen. Snow and ice are no substitute for clean, unfrozen drinking water. Your horse's risk of impaction colic is greatly increased if he doesn't have access to unfrozen water at all times.

To Blanket or not to blanket?

Not every horse has a wooly coat. Some breeds of horses have thinner coats, and others have thin coats from blanketing, being under lights, living in a warm climate or barn, or having been clipped. The primary way a horse gets or stays warm is by digesting hay. Digestion is really a fermentation process, and one of the by-products is heat. When your horse is facing a cold night, the first consideration is to provide him with plenty of hay to keep that furnace burning. And in order for that digestion process to work well, he needs water.

Remember, though, when you put a blanket on your horse, you squash that natural insulating layer of air in his coat. In borderline situations, he may actually be more comfortable wearing his natural blanket than your store-bought one. It's usually necessary to blanket a body-clipped horse. You can layer blankets, the way you might wear a light sweater under your coat. And for any horse out in wet weather, keeping him dry is key to keeping him warm.

Always have somewhere sheltered from the wind, preferably facing south for the sunshine, with dry ground for your horse to escape the elements.

