

PREPARING HORSES FOR A HAPPY, HEALTHY WINTER

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It is November, and with winter rapidly approaching, there are a few simple yet important reminders to keep horses healthy as the weather changes. Factors regarding feed, body condition, water, shelter and blanketing should all be considered when preparing and adapting to the season's changes.

One misconception when feeding horses as temperatures drop is that adding more grain to the diet will keep a horse warmer. Heat is produced through digestion; however, more heat is produced when digesting high-fiber feeds like hay. Heat is a by-product of microbial fermentation occurring in the cecum and large colon. Cereal grains are excellent for increasing calories, and easily digestible without producing this internal warming effect. It is imperative to have teeth checked before pastures deteriorate and horses begin to depend more on other forage. Many older horses with poor dentition do well through the summer when consuming mainly soft, rich grass, but lose condition rapidly as winter advances.

Depending on the severity of a particular winter season and a horse's individual body condition and circumstances, more calories may be required to maintain body temperature and weight. There is some debate, but most healthy horses don't require increased calories to maintain core body temperature until the temperature falls below 20 degrees F. This "critical temperature" will be higher for young, old, and thinner horses with lighter haircoats. Because all horses are different, the best way to determine if you are feeding appropriately is to routinely assess body condition. Ideally, a horse will start winter with a body condition score (BCS) of at least 5 (moderate) but preferably 6-6 ½ (moderately fleshy). A horse with a little insulation will require less dietary intake of calories to maintain its weight than a thin one. A horse with a BCS of <4 does not have an adequate amount of fat to

keep warm when temperatures fall. Body condition is best determined by putting your hands on the horse, as thick winter haircoats can mask true condition. Blankets must be removed and horses touched frequently for proper evaluation.

Water supply is another important component of keeping your horse healthy this winter. Dehydration can lead to impaction colic and winter is when this is most frequently encountered. Horses need clean, fresh water free of ice at all times. Studies have shown that horses will drink a greater quantity if the water temperature is between 45 and 75 degrees F. To encourage horses to drink adequately, heated tanks or buckets are ideal. If this is not practical, this may mean replacing water more frequently rather than just chipping or removing ice from the top. In addition, horses will not eat enough snow, if any at all, to stay hydrated. Horses will continue to eat the same amount of forage and consume less water, contributing to less moisture in the GI tract and increasing the incidence of impactions. Many people ask if electrolytes will assist in increasing water consumption. Some horses will consume powdered electrolytes added to water, but plain water must always be available, as other, more finicky horses, will refuse to drink anything else. Most of the time adding electrolytes is unnecessary, as most horses will self regulate their intake if the water supply is a reasonable temperature.

Another way to minimize a horse's energy demands this winter is to provide some sort of shelter. A clean, thick winter coat is the equine's first line of defense against mother nature. The perfect insulator when dry and raised, this insulating effect is lost when the coat gets wet. Providing shelter in



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the form of a run-in shed or stall allows horses to stay dry. It also allows horses to escape the wind; just a 10-15 mph wind can increase energy demands if the ambient temperature is below freezing. As a result, your horse stays warm and uses less energy doing so. Also keep in mind that if your horse is stalled inside full or part-time proper ventilation should be a concern, especially in horses with respiratory conditions such as recurrent airway obstruction (RAO) or "heaves". These diseases can quickly progress in improper environmental conditions such as a closed up, dusty barn.

In addition, many people inquire about blanketing. Although most healthy horses do fine without them, water-proof blankets can decrease the risk of weather exposure by preventing moisture and wind, especially in horses that are body-clipped or have

failed to grow a good thick haircoat. However, if using blankets, owners must be diligent in monitoring them to ensure their horses are not damp or wet underneath. Whether wet due to sweat or just a poor-quality blanket, this will make them colder than no blanket at all. Blankets must also be removed frequently, as body condition can be easily neglected when out of sight. In addition, by keeping horses dry, skin conditions such as dermatophilis (rain rot), pastern dermatitis (scratches, dew poisoning) and other problems related to increased moisture can be avoided.

Horses have an amazing innate ability to survive in the cold, but with some assistance from knowledgeable owners and managers, winter doesn't have to be nearly as challenging!



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