



Tips for Winter Horse Care



As the weather turns cold, many horses are ridden less and less. It is easy to become relaxed in a horse's daily care since they are not being used as often. However, horses still require much care and attention throughout the winter. Here are just a few of the points to think about when caring for your horses during those frigid winter months.

- For a horse to be an "easy keeper" during the winter he needs to be free of parasites, in good flesh, and properly immunized going into the winter. We tend to think that if we are cold, our horses must be cold. Not necessarily so. Preconditioning horses before the onset of cold temperatures helps to reduce the effect of cold weather on the horse and will reduce his nutritional needs to maintain weight. A horse shouldn't lose weight in the winter. In fact, a little extra layer of fat to fend off the cold won't hurt. Fat cover acts as an insulator and provides energy reserves during stress. Altering your feeding program for the upcoming winter by providing some extra calories will allow horses to lay down an insulating layer of fat under the skin.
- The winter coat is a horse's first defense from the cold. When allowed to grow, a horse's natural coat acts as a thermal blanket. A winter coat is also naturally greasy, which helps repel snow, ice and sleet. Horses that are to be maintained outside should be allowed to grow long hair coat, plus the hair within the ears and around the fetlocks should not be clipped throughout the winter months. Stabled horses may need blanketing when they are turned out during the day, but the best blanket for an outside horse is his own full winter coat.
- Falling temperatures, wind and wet conditions cause a tremendous demand on the horse's body for heat production. As with all warm-blooded animals, horses must maintain their body temperature to survive. The environmental temperature and the heat produced within the body determine the extent to which heat must be conserved. The body does little to regulate heat generation and heat loss when the environmental temperatures are within ranges of the animal's comfort zone or the "thermal neutral zone." As environmental temperatures fall below the minimal temperature of the comfort zone or "critical temperature," heat production is increased by the body by speeding up chemical reactions which produce heat.
- The combination of cold wind and rain or sleet is probably the worst case scenario for a horse. Under those conditions, without shelter, he can quickly become chilled. Older horses, in

particular, tend to have difficulty maintaining their internal temperatures in such circumstances. The effects of falling temperatures, wind and wet conditions will put a enormous requirement on the horse's body for heat production. How much body condition a horse loses depends on the severity and duration of the cold season and the amount of energy the horse receives from its feed.

- Know in advance what you are going to feed during the winter months. When first frost kills your summer pasture is not the time to decide on a winter feeding program and it can be detrimental to your horse. When the temperatures dip, the best heat source for your horse is extra hay. During the cold weather it is best to increase the amount of hay, not concentrated feeds. Hay is digested in the cecum and colon which results in heat production by bacterial fermentation.
- Without water, nothing in your horse's body will function. Water should be available at all times. Water should be maintained between 45-65 degrees F and any ice crystals should be removed. If you are in an area that has regular freezing, check the water supply twice daily as horses will drink 8 to 12 gallons a day.
- Stalling is not necessary for all horses but protection from the winter elements is necessary. Horses acclimate to winter conditions extremely well but need to be able to escape the bitter winds and moisture. A small, three sided run in shed or timberline to provide escape from strong winds and snow or ice is often all that is necessary for pastured horses. Horses provided shelter will require less feed, can more easily maintain body weight and are less stressed. These effects make the cost of sheds and windbreaks more attractive by reducing feed bills and reducing stress related sickness.
- Care should be taken when leaving younger, less experienced horses on winter pasture. Running an older horse as a "baby sitter" can help teach the youngsters how to find shelter, food and water.

Consult your local equine veterinarian when you have questions or concerns about your horses health and well-being. Create and maintain a proper winter management plan for your horses and they will respond by coming out of winter fit and ready for the new year.