



Winter Horse Care

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Cold weather brings along extra responsibilities for horse owners. This article contains a few tips to ensure that horses' needs are met during winter months.

Winter Horse Care Tips

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As we gear up for the arrival of Old Man Winter, we are reminded of the challenges that winter horse care brings. The cold, snow, ice, rain, wind and any combination thereof, complicates barn chores and limits our riding time. For these reasons, we typically do not spend as much time in our barns or with our horses during the winter months. However, by keeping a few simple things in mind we can ensure our horses are receiving adequate care this time of year.

Access to Water

With the cold weather brings the risk for frozen water buckets and troughs in our stalls and pastures. Free and continuous access to water is important to maintain healthy horses. Excessively cold water will decrease your horse's water consumption. Ideally, water should be maintained at about 40 degrees F. Heated waterers are commonly used to assure the water source is not too cold or frozen over. When a horse's water consumption decreases, feed intake also decreases, leaving less energy available to maintain body temperature and condition. Reduced water and feed intake also leave your horse at risk for a number of intestinal health issues, including dehydration and impaction colic.

Adequate Shelter

While horses will need some protection from the elements, it is not necessary to keep them in a closed barn throughout the winter. Horses have two natural defenses against the cold – a long winter coat and a layer of fat beneath the skin, providing an excellent source of insulation. Keep in mind that the insulating ability of a horse's hair coat is lost when a horse is wet or covered in mud, so it is important to provide a dry shelter and regular grooming for them in cold, wet weather.

Proper Nutrition

Provided forage quality remains consistent, horses' nutritional needs do not significantly change during the winter months. Older horses or horses with compromised health may have a more difficult time maintaining body condition in extremely cold weather. A horse should be fed according to its type, age, and use – letting body condition be your guide. Inactivity and overfeeding are probably a bigger concern this time of year, as they can lead to obesity and associated health problems in the spring.

Regular Hoof Care

The same amount of attention should be paid to your horse's hooves, whether you are riding regularly or not. This is often one aspect of horse care that is overlooked in the winter. Horses' hooves are still growing in the winter months and they are walking on frozen, uneven ground, so timely and appropriate farrier work is important. Also, remember to pick hooves regularly to remove dirt and debris.



For more information on winter horse care or related topics, contact your local cooperative extension office.

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