

Caring for Your Horse During the Winter Months

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As with all species of animals, living outside and survival through the winter months can be stressful for the horse. However, by following a few simple health care practices and managerial procedures, you can provide more desirable living conditions and can keep your horse(s) more comfortable during the cold weather.

Prior to winter, fall vaccinations should be update and pregnant mares should receive vaccinations for Rhinopneumonitis during their 5th, 7th and 9th month of gestation. Rotational deworming practices should also be continued through the winter months. Following a hard frost and the decline in the fly population, a deworming product effective in breaking the bott parasite cycle (product containing ivermectin, avermectin, or moxidectin) should be administered. Removal of visible bott eggs from the skin will reduce parasite winter carryover. As always, to ensure appropriate vaccination protocols, deworming protocols and special health care needs for your horses, consult your attending veterinarian.

Given the opportunity, most horses can acclimate to the colder temperatures. Two lines of defense against the cold weather include having ample body flesh and a thick hair coat. Increasing the level of available energy is the most important feeding requirement for the winter months. An ample supply of high quality hay will help provide a continuous source of energy and heat throughout the day. Concentrates can also be fed twice a day to horses that are harder to keep in good flesh. Salt and minerals should continue to be provided via a salt/mineral block or as part of the concentrate ration. With the higher quantity of fiber being ingested, fresh water (maintained at or above 45° F) is vital for maintaining proper digestive activity, decreasing the risk of impaction colic.

Exposure to cooler temperatures through the fall will stimulate an increase in hair coat, preparing the horse for the cold weather. Additional shelter should be provided as protection from freezing rain, sleet, wind, and severe storms. Common forms of shelter include a grove of trees, a wind break wall, a three sided open shed, or access to a stall. Regardless of the type of shelter, consideration needs to be taken to ensure all horses can take shelter when needed, including the inferior horse within the herd.

Routine hoof care should be maintained through the winter. Shoes should be removed except in specific situations of poor hoof quality, hoof problems or continued riding. Normal shoes decrease traction and increase the incidence of “snow ball” development, causing unnecessary strain on tendons, ligaments and muscles in the legs and making it difficult for the horse to move. Applying a form of oil on the soles can temporarily decrease snowball buildup. If shoes are necessary, snowball pads and traction enhancers can be recommended by your farrier.

Keeping your horse(s) comfortable during the winter is an important responsibility for all horse owners. By following some of these simple management strategies you can provide a safer, healthier environment for your horse.