

COLD WEATHER HORSE CARE

One of the worst things for a horse during the winter months is ice; most importantly, the ice that covers the water tank or water bucket. Mature horses need about 10 gallons of water a day. Excessively cold water will decrease the horse's consumption. Lowered water consumption results in decreased feed intake. A reduction in feed intake results in less energy being available to maintain body temperature and body weight during cold months. Further, reduced water intake can lead to colic because of an impacted intestinal tract in the horse.

Heated waterers set to maintain 40 degrees are one way to assure your horse an ample supply of drinking water. If electric water heaters are used, the water tank should be checked every day to ensure that the heater is not shorting out and shocking the horse.

The horse should be fed according to body condition, not season. Most mature horses that are idle and in good flesh can survive the winter quite well on good quality hay and plenty of clean water.

Horses will generally consume 1 to 1-1/2 pounds of hay per 100 pounds of body weight, and if needed, 1/2 to 1-1/2 pounds of grain per 100 pounds of body weight. If the horse is not maintaining good body condition or is performing some work, grain should be added to the diet.

All horses should have access to trace mineralized salt to meet their electrolyte and trace mineral needs. Calcium and phosphorus are especially important to the young, growing horse for bone growth and development. Weanlings need about .56 percent calcium and .31 percent phosphorus in their daily ration. Ratios less than 1:1, where phosphorus intake exceeds calcium intake, may be detrimental to calcium

absorption, possibly causing skeletal malformations.

Adequate levels of vitamins are present in sufficient amounts in good quality horse feed, especially in preserved green hay. However, if the hay appears brown, weathered, and the hay quality is questionable, additional vitamin supplementation might be needed.

The horse has two natural defenses against cold: a long hair coat and a layer of fat under the skin. Both provide excellent means of insulation against the cold. The long, winter hair coat serves as insulation by reducing the loss of body heat and provides the first line of defense against the cold. The coat's insulation value is lost when the horse becomes wet and/or is covered with mud, or the hair is matted. This is why it is important to provide a dry, sheltered area in cold, wet weather and to groom regularly. It is important to keep the horse from losing body weight and approaching a state where he does not have the energy to keep himself warm.

Although horses need shelter from cold winds, rain, and snow, it is not necessary to keep them in a closed barn throughout the winter. All barns should have proper ventilation to eliminate excess moisture and condensation buildup and protect against direct drafts. Horses maintained in an enclosed barn should be exercised regularly to maintain muscling and health. Show horses with hair coats that are artificially short should not be turned outside in bitter winter cold without protection of a blanket or windbreak.

The horse, when given the opportunity, will acclimate to cold temperatures without much difficulty. ♦

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