

WINTER CARE

Horses are well adapted to cold weather. As long as they have shelter from wind and wet, horses can stay comfortable when the temperatures plunge. A south-facing three sided shelter with straw bedding will see a well-fed horse through the roughest winter weather. However, make sure the shelter is wide rather than deep or you'll find horses low on the pecking order afraid to go in. In the wild horses can withstand temperatures at well below zero.

BLANKETING- Horses that live inside stalls need blanketing when they're turned out during the day, *but the best blanket for an outside horse is his own full winter coat*. If your horse does wear a blanket, remove the blanket at least once a day for grooming and to make sure that the horse's coat isn't dry or irritated because of the blanket. Wash blankets regularly. If your horse or pony wears a winter blanket during the winter remove it daily and check for chaffing and irritation. Daily grooming keeps coats cleaner and keeps your horse more comfortable if he wears a blanket. Most horses begin shedding their summer hair in August and start growing thicker winter coats. A horse's diet should provide an adequate quantity and quality of protein in order to produce a dense, healthy coat. A normal winter coat has as much insulating capacity as most top-of-the-line blankets. The downward growth of the long hair coupled with the stepped-up production of body oils allows the winter coat to shed water and keeps moisture away from the skin. A dry horse has a much better chance of remaining a healthy horse. A healthy horse can withstand temperatures well below freezing as long as it is sunny and the horse's body traps the heat next to the skin. During cold temperatures, pilo erector muscles make the hair stand up which increases the coat's insulating potential. Wind separates the hairs, thereby breaking the heat seal which results in a great loss of body warmth.

SHELTER- One important thing to remember is that although horses do well in colder temperatures, they can be affected by cold winds which not only make them extremely uncomfortable but also have a tendency to spook the horse. You can keep your horse happier by providing some type of wind break such as a run-in-shed in the pasture. If your horse does not have access to a run-in shed, a line of trees may be adequate to block some of the wind, but it is advisable that they at least have some sort of shelter or place to get out of the wind and wet during cold weather & for protection from potential wind, snow and freezing rain. *It is not necessary or desirable to have an air-tight, heated barn for horses. In fact, that is one of the unhealthiest environments in which a horse can live.* Shelter consists of a cluster of trees, a ravine, hill, canyon, or creek bottom as well as of man-made structures. A simple three-sided shed can be situated with the back wall to the prevailing winds (often north) and the opening facing the sun (usually south in the weather).

FEEDING- For every ten degrees Fahrenheit below freezing, the ration should be increased 10%. When it is twelve degrees above zero Fahrenheit (twenty degrees below freezing), a 1200 pound horse's normal hay ration should be increased to about 19 pounds per day (a 20% increase). Horses fed less than is necessary to combat cold and wind will burn fat and muscle tissue by shivering to keep warm and they will lose weight.

When temperatures dip, the best heat source for your horse is extra hay. To make sure all your horses get their fair share of hay, spread out one more pile than the number of horses. That way, when the boss horse keeps thinking another pile looks better than the one she's presently eating from, the other horses can move to new piles too. Horses kept outside need to eat more fodder. Horses produce a lot of heat during digestion. A generous supply of hay helps keep the horse's internal furnace stoked. ***Be sure that you are not increasing the grain intake, as increased grain intake will not provide the desired results of helping your horse to stay warmer. In fact, excess grain has been linked to foundering and potentially colic.*** Preparation for winter begins well before the first snow. In August and September, horses living in temperature climates should be allowed an increase in body weight of about 5%, but not more than 10%. A 1200- pound adult can gain 60-120 pounds in the late summer or early fall. This extra flesh and fat will provide added insulation, energy and heat reserve for when weather is particularly bad.

WATER- Horses require a lot of water to digest dry feed. In addition to providing extra hay, you should also always provide fresh water for your horse. Although the weather is colder, horses still need enough water intake to keep their digestive tracts in line. Water prevents dehydration and is a vital part of keeping your horse healthy. Not only should you provide fresh water, but check the water regularly for ice.

STALL- Add extra bedding to your horse's stall when it's very cold to act as insulation.

RIDING IN THE WINTER- Use a "cooler" to cool your horse down after riding in the winter. When a horse has been ridden and is all sweaty and warm, it can catch a chill in the cold winter air or its muscles can stiffen up and cause problems. Using a cooler will allow your horse to cool down naturally without the risk of catching a chill.