

Horse Health Care in the Winter

Keeping your horse warm, healthy, and happy during the winter can be challenging, especially if you live in a climate with extreme cold weather. While temperatures don't drop too far here in Texas, I have many clients in northern states who struggle to keep their horses fat and sassy during this winter. So this issue is dedicated to horse health care during the winter, including ways to minimize your feed bill and ways to prevent chiropractic issues.

Horse Health Care Basics for Winter

Before diving into the different kinds of horse feed and other tips, I'm going to first cover the basics. These apply year-round, but are especially important before winter sets in. You probably already know about these, but I would be remiss if I didn't mention them so I'll cover them quickly here.

Teeth: If your horse has not had a float within the last year, it may be time to take him in for a checkup and possibly a float. A horse with sharp points, hooks, or ramps in his mouth tends to drop feed or chew improperly, which can lead to indigestion or colic. More importantly, your horse doesn't get the most out of his feed and you could end up with unwanted vet bills to treat colic.

Parasites: Going into winter, it's always a good idea to check your horse for parasites with a fecal test. Even if the fecal test comes back negative, you may want to give your horse a double dose of Strongid-type wormer to take care of tapeworms, which do not show up in a fecal analysis. You can do this up to once a year.

Stress: Horses can quickly lose weight when stressed. Causes of stress are numerous, including extreme physical cold, injuries, hard training, or even changes in living environment. Horses can also be emotionally stressed by doing a job for which they are not suited or if their living conditions are unsuitable. For instance, a horse that is constantly being picked on by his herd mates won't have access to feed, and may not feel like eating.

The Best Horse Feed for Winter

To keep your horse healthy this winter, you need to make sure he is getting enough of the right kind of calories to stay warm, and drinking enough water to keep his digestion functioning properly.

Let's talk about calories first. If the temperature drops dramatically during the winter in your part of the country, your goal will be to keep your horse warm. The best way to feed your horse to keep him warm is to increase the fiber in his diet, which includes hay, alfalfa, and beet pulp. Increased fiber keeps a horse warmer than increased grain because the digestion of fiber generates heat. Hay and other kinds of fiber are digested in the horse's hindgut, or large intestine, which generates much more heat than digestion in the small intestine (where grain is mostly digested).

So increase your horse's fiber content first to keep him warm. If he loses weight and still needs more calories, consider adding a bit of alfalfa or grain. Up to a cup of corn oil per day will also help keep weight on your horse.

Then there is your horse's water intake, which is especially important during the winter. Horses tend to drink less in cold weather, since cold water makes them feel colder. If your horse doesn't drink enough water to keep his digestion functioning, especially during cold dry weather, he could end up with impaction colic.

There are several ways to increase your horse's fluid intake during the winter. I like feeding bran mashes made with warm water. Horses love bran mashes and the high water content is great for their digestion. The warm water in the mash also helps your horse feel warmer. You can also offer beet pulp shreds soaked with hot water. Since it can take 30 minutes or more to soak beet pulp, you may need to top up the bucket with hot water before serving it, otherwise it will be cold.

Horse Health Care in Winter: Blankets and Clipping

If you blanket your horse during the winter, choose a blanket that both fits and is made of a lightweight material. A well-fitting blanket does not "pull" across the shoulders, chest, or withers. Most newer blankets are pleated at the shoulder and designed to avoid this tightness over the withers and chest. It's important to choose a blanket that fits because an ill-fitting blanket, worn all winter, can create chiropractic issues that you will have to solve in the spring.

I also suggest you invest in one of the new blankets made of lightweight materials, as opposed to using older-style canvas blankets. The lightweight material in new blankets allows your horse's hair to stay fluffy, which keeps him warmer. Older-style blankets tend to flatten your horse's coat, which will make him feel chilly.

Finally, if at all possible, avoid body clipping your horse. If you must clip your horse's coat, stick with a hunter clip, which at least leaves your horse with some of his winter coat while still allowing him to work hard without sweating too much.