

Equine Health Solutions

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Winter Wonderland

If you have lived in the Midwest for awhile, you know that winter brings freezing temperatures, wind, snow and ice. When the cold hits, being prepared for it with proper care and management provisions for your horse, is key to keeping him healthy until warmer weather returns.

Home Sweet Home

Providing, at the least, a south facing three-sided lean-to with straw bedding, will help protect your horse from the weather. The roof slope should direct water away from the entrance, and the ground should have good drainage, so that muddy or icy patches don't form. For a pasture horse, this is sufficient protection as long as the shelter remains dry and there is plenty of hay to fuel his insides, keeping him warm from the inside out. Also, be sure the shelter is roomy enough to handle everyone, even those low on the pecking order, who might be afraid to come in.

To Blanket or Not to Blanket

The choice of a blanket should depend on your horses living environment. If your horse is outside, his own full winter coat is best. Warm air is trapped close to the body as the hair coat stands up; the hair coat is flattened with a blanket. A stabled horse that is turned out during the day would need blanketing. Always make sure a blanket fits properly to prevent rubbing or sores, and that it is well maintained, with no holes or dangling straps. Consulting with your barn manager or a trusted horseperson may be of help in choosing the proper blanket for your horses needs.

Hay and Ice Water – Yum!

Your horses feed and water needs are different in winter than other seasons. He should not lose weight and weight loss is easily hidden under a thick winter coat. Since more energy is needed to maintain your horses body temperature, having a supply of good hay in place is vitally important. Your dry and yellow pasture has no nutritional value, so an adequate diet should be determined before winter sets in. Consulting with your equine veterinarian can help you decide what additional feed would benefit your horse.

A horse typically drinks 10 to 12 gallons of water per day. In winter, however, he might not drink as much, because very cold water is unappealing or access to the water source is hampered by snow or ice. A

stock-tank heater placed in the water trough or an electric bucket heater can keep his water thawed. (Be sure devices are properly installed and mounted securely to prevent electrical shock!) A fence post or long stick can also be placed in the water trough. As the water freezes, the stick leaves an air pocket between the frozen water surface and the water below. Simply tug on the post and the surface ice will break. Moving the trough or bucket to a more convenient winter water supply, will allow you to offer clean, warm water at feeding time. Be sure to monitor your horse's water intake to make sure he stays hydrated and keep him from the risk of impaction colic.

Ice Skating is Not a Horse Sport

Can you imagine walking on snow or ice without a good pair of boots? You will need to pay close attention to your horses hoof care, watching for chips or cracks on an unshod horse and the need for pads or caulk if shod. Watch the soles of the feet for ice packing; this can lead to sole bruises and even abscesses. If bruising becomes a problem, your equine veterinarian or your farrier can provide proper hoof care or shoeing alternatives. If you find that ice is building up, pick the feet out and, to help prevent build up, apply a thin coat of Vaseline or Crisco to the soles. Always clean snow and ice from the feet before entering the barn. Keeping areas leading into the barn free from ice by sanding or salting can help prevent potential injuries from slips and falls, for you and your horse. When your horse walks on frozen ground, even if there is no ice, it's like walking on concrete. Keep in mind that mud can be as slippery and dangerous as ice.

In the event of sleet, freezing rain or an ice storm, pasture horses will typically stay inside a run-in shelter until footing is safe, as long as they have food and water. Stabled horses should not be turned out until conditions improve. A one inch layer of ice weighs about five pounds per square foot, so be sure your shelter roof can withstand the weight of a layer of ice.

Preparation, management and attention to your horses surroundings can help get your horse through the winter in good and fit condition.