

Equine winter care

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Once in good health and provided with adequate nutrition, horses are well equipped to deal with wind, cold and even snow.

Stabling

Adequate ventilation will help to protect the animal's respiratory system from endotoxins; from manure and dust; mould from forage and bedding and ammonia from urine. When cleaning stables, turn animals out or move them to a clean stable to reduce exposure to these harmful agents.

Turnout

Even during the worst winter days, cold, fresh air is desirable and comfortable for horses. Full-time turnout, or as much as is possible, is the healthiest way for a horse to live once adequate shelter is available. Besides benefiting musculoskeletal and mental health, exercise is also important to maintain intestinal mobility.

Shelter can be as simple as a good non-deciduous hedge or a man-made shelter that protects against prevailing winds. In frosty conditions, don't turn out regularly stabled horses.

Rugs

For horses with full coats, rugs are rarely needed. Horses have an innate ability to withstand cold and wind with no more than a windbreak. Rugs tend to compress woolly coats reducing their insulating properties. Horses that have poor body condition, are prone to weight loss, or are clipped should wear rugs. Regularly remove rugs to inspect the animal's condition.

Body condition and nutrition

Assessing body weight and body condition over the winter is critical. Weigh tapes offer a good guide and will help you monitor if condition is being gained or lost. It is also a good idea to occasionally assess body condition by handling (especially ribs



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and spine) and closely observing the horse.

Horses that are living out keep warm by burning calories. To maintain body condition they need high quality forage (hay/haylage) and the recommended amount of suitable hard feed. The amount and type of hard feed will depend on body weight, body condition and workload.

Additional calories help to keep a horse warm but it is best to increase calories by offering more good quality forage as the first option over bag feed. Fermentation of forage in the hindgut generates internal warmth without risking a carbohydrate overload that could cause laminitis.

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Horses that maintain body condition may do very well on a diet of forage, a small quantity of straight such as oats and a balancer product. Animals that require a high calorie intake to maintain or add condition will require a more energy-dense diet and perhaps oil supplementation.

“Poor doers” also benefit from being fed several small meals (no more than 2kg per meal for a 500kg horse).

It is critical to check water sources regularly and ensure that they are both clean and unblocked. Water intake is especially important in winter to maintain hydration and prevent impaction colic.

Feet and teeth

Feet and legs should be cared for too. There is an increased risk of things such as thrush (if stabled); stone bruises; abscesses and mud fever at this time of year, particularly for horses in muddy conditions.

All horses should have an annual dental check, with those under three years requiring two checks per year. Sharp edges, hooks or dental disease will prevent a horse from gaining maximum benefit from its food. Most horses need dental work and floating (rasping) once or twice a year.

Parasite control

The recommendation these days is to decrease worming frequency, move away from regular treatments and treat on the basis of parasite burden measured with the assistance of faecal egg counts and ELISA blood test (tapeworm). This will reduce the risk of resistance to chemical products, which is an ever increasing problem. Consult with your vet about using faecal egg count tests to tailor a programme to your farm. Smart pasture management aids significantly in reducing parasite burden.

Conclusion

Horses thrive best when they can move around and breathe fresh air, regardless of the season. Provide adequate feed and shelter and your horse will be comfortable as well as winter-safe.