

Getting Your Horses Ready For Winter

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Even though it is already very cold in some areas of the country, winter officially arrives on December 22. Depending on whether your horse is show horse kept inside or a broodmare kept outside in the pasture, there are several things you can do to help your horse through the winter. Contrary to popular opinion, heat is much harder on animals than cold. That being the case we will start off focusing on the horses housed inside for the winter.

One of the first things most people do to protect their horses from the cold is to close up the barn. Most of the time the main reason for keeping the horses extra warm is to keep them from growing a winter coat. While a nice slick hair coat is necessary for placing well in shows, a good set of lungs is also necessary. If the barn is closed up too tightly and the ventilation is poor, the ammonia levels will build up in the barn and high ammonia levels can damage the lungs which can lead to pneumonia. The ammonia levels are especially high closer to the floor so when the horse lies down he is breathing high levels of ammonia if the stall has not been properly cleaned and the ventilation is poor. It is very important to keep the stalls well cleaned twice daily but it is even more important if the windows and doors are kept closed.

Another thing to consider with inside show horses is their blankets. Horses in a closed barn generate a lot of heat and the barn will stay relatively warm with the doors and windows closed. With a few horses in the barn so when you add blankets and sheets to the equation, make sure the horses don't get too hot. Many times if you put your hand under the blanket, you will find that your horse is sweating. You can actually dehydrate a horse by keeping him too hot with too many blankets and sheets. This goes for horses that are put outside with blankets and sheets on also.

If you want to keep the hair coat short, the best way to do it is to keep the horses under sixteen hours of light each day. Do not use more than sixteen hours of light as more is not better and is actually worse. One negative to this plan is that your horse's metabolism is meant to have a certain number of days per year with shorter hours of light. So if you have him under lights all winter you have to be careful in the spring that when you stop the lights that the daylight hours you supply are not actually shorter or your horse will think it is fall and will start to grow hair in the spring.

Outside horses mainly need a place to get out of the rain and wind. A two sided shelter with walls breaking the prevailing winds is plenty. Depending on where you live you will probably need to increase your horses caloric intake to make up for the energy spent staying warm. A good way to keep your horse warm is to supply plenty of roughage. Eating hay generates heat inside the body and therefore warms the horse from the inside. It is better to provide most of the calories in roughage but if your horse cannot maintain his weight with hay alone then add a well balanced grain mixture to the daily allotment of hay. Your horse should eat about 2% of his body weight in good quality roughage per day. That is twenty pounds for a 1000 pound horse.

It is also a good practice to have your horse's yearly preventive dental care done before the winter if he is an outside horse in a cold climate. Good teeth help him to digest his hay well. One last thing to make sure of in areas where the water freezes is to make sure your horses always have access to water. Lack of water is a sure way to cause your horse to have an impaction colic.

Remember, warmth is a good thing but don't over do it. My horses live in a barn that is well ventilated in the winter. The doors and windows are closed when it is cold but the stalls are kept clean and the air can escape through openings in the roof. They do not wear blankets and their hair coats look great. They are fed a very well balanced diet. Most of winter preparation and care is common sense. Pay attention to your horse and he will tell you what you need to do.

Merry Christmas and may God bless you and your family this Christmas season! Stay warm and don't eat too much!

Ask The Vet

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