

Equine Winter Care

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Horses prefer, and are better off, outdoors even in cold weather, and will acclimate to cold temperatures if given the opportunity. Energy needs for maintenance horses increase 0.7% for each degree of temperature below 18°F. For example, if the temperature is 0°F, a 1,000 pound idle, adult horse would need an additional 1.3 pounds of forage daily. It is best to provide the extra energy as forage. Some believe that feeding more grain will help keep a horse warmer. However, not as much heat is produced as a by-product of digestion, absorption and utilization of grain as there is from the microbial fermentation of forages. Most data suggest that the need for other nutrients do not change during cold weather. However, consider feeding loose salt instead of block salt, as horses may not want to lick blocks during winter months.

Horses should have access to shelter from wind, sleet and storms. Free access to a stable or open-sided shed works well, as do trees if a building is not available. In the absence of wind and moisture, horses tolerate temperatures at or slightly below 0°F. If horses have access to a shelter, they can tolerate temperature as low as -40°F. However, horses are most comfortable at temperatures between 18-59°F, depending on their hair coat. If your horse is housed in a closed and heated stable, make sure it is properly ventilated. Poorly ventilated barns can result in respiratory problems.

A horse's winter coat can be an excellent insulator, but its insulating value is lost if it gets wet. It is important to keep the horse dry and sheltered from moisture. Research has been conducted on the benefits of blanketing a horse to reduce the effects of cold weather. However, most horses are blanketed for personal beliefs of the owner. Blanketing a horse is necessary to reduce effects of cold or inclement weather when:

1. There is no shelter available during turnout periods and the temperatures drop below 5°F, or the wind chill is below 5°F.
2. There is a chance the horse will become wet. This is not usually a problem with snow, but much more of a problem with rain, ice and/or freezing rain.
3. The horse's winter coat is clipped.
4. The horse is very young or very old.
5. The horse has not been acclimated to the cold (i.e., has recently been brought up from a southern climate).
6. The horse has a body condition score of 3 or less.

Keep in mind a horse will continue to develop a natural winter coat until December 22, while days are becoming shorter. Horses begin to lose their winter coat, and start forming their summer coat, as the days begin to get longer on December 23. Blanketing before December 22 will decrease a horse's natural winter coat. Make sure blankets are kept dry and do not put a blanket on a wet horse.

Water should be kept between 45°-65°F to maximize consumption. It should be cleaned regularly (even in winter); clean, fresh water should always be available, regardless of temperature. Snow should not be used as a water source. According to Chapter 346 in the MN Pet and Companion Animal Welfare Act, "...snow or ice is not an adequate water source." There are serious health risks associated with snow consumption including: adjustment period as horses learn to ingest snow, actual water content of the snow and total water intake. Some wild horses can receive their water needs from snow, but the risk of gastrointestinal tract problems, colic and reduced feed intake is significant for domesticated horses. Relying on snow as the source of water for domesticated horses in some states is illegal and not recommended.