

# Winter Care for Horses

By Eleanor Richards

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Baby, it's cold outside!

Providing a comfortable and healthy environment helps ensure the horse will enter the busy spring healthy as possible. Nutrition, shelter and basic health are important year around, but during the cold months, these issues are even more critical.

## **NUTRITION**

Water is the most important nutrient in a horse's diet. Many colic cases occur due to dehydration. Clean water accessible twenty-four hours a day is mandatory. Heated water buckets, stock tank heater automatic waterers ensure that water remains unfrozen. These units must be cleaned and monitored.

Do not expect a horse to eat snow or break through the ice and remain healthy.

Access to plenty of good, clean, nutritional forage (hay) is the first concern. The digestion of fiber in the hindgut generates heat and helps keep the horse warm.

Horses should have grass hay available free choice. A minimum of 1.5% - 2.0% of the body weight should be fed each day; this amount will vary with individual horses and hay quality.

Horses waste poor quality hay, so larger amounts will need to be fed. They will discard the parts they do not eat. The hay should be free from weeds, dust, and mold.

Less grain is needed when plenty of good quality hay is fed. Horses are grazers.

A balanced commercial feed that complements the forage and meets the horse's nutritional requirements should be offered. The barn manager needs to evaluate each individual horse:

Is he lacking protein? Signs are poor muscle tone over the back, shoulders, and loin area. Poor hair coat and hair coat are also symptoms of protein deficiency.

Is he receiving enough calories? This may vary from manager to manager; some people like horse others like them athletic looking. But they should all have some fat covering the rib area. Close your eyes and run your hand over his ribs - how much pressure must you apply in order to feel ribs? If you can feel ribs without applying any pressure he needs calories (add fat to the diet). If you can't feel ribs and want to decrease weight make sure you don't short him on vitamins and minerals.

Is it a pregnant mare, a stallion ready to enter breeding season, a young horse starting training, a horse having a weight problem, or a horse with health problems? The hay will not provide all the nutrition needs of these unique individuals. Vitamin, mineral and energy requirements must be met.

A common misconception is increasing or adding corn to the diet will keep the horse warm. Corn does increase digestible energy in the diet, but will not generate internal heat. (The digestion of fiber in the hindgut generates heat and helps keep the horse warm.)

## **SHELTER**

Most healthy horses will be fine if they are provided a windbreak and dry, clean place. Horses with special concerns such as seniors, foals or compromised health will need individual care. Observe the horse: Is

shivering? Is he standing by himself with a depressed attitude and no interest in his surroundings? The horse needs immediate attention.

### **BASIC HEALTH CARE**

Deworming - it is important to prepare horses for the stress of winter by maintaining a good worming program. A horse supporting a large worm count will have trouble remaining healthy during the winter.

Hoof care - it is easy to ignore the care of the hooves during the cold and often muddy winter season. "Hoof, no horse."

Horses need regular farrier work and the hooves kept clean. A horse standing in a wet dirty stall develops thrush and other hoof problems.

Vaccinations - a good vaccination program is important. If a horse becomes sick with a disease that could have been prevented through vaccination the recovery time can be longer during the stress of the winter, not to mention the added work to the caretaker, who is also struggling with the routine chores.

\* Proper nutrition and management practices can prevent many problems associated with caring for horses. You can learn how to provide your horse with a better life-style by taking the online course "How to Feed for Performance" taught by Eleanor Richards. Go to [www.horsecoursesonline.com](http://www.horsecoursesonline.com) for more information. Contact Eleanor at [elrichards@thewayofhorses.com](mailto:elrichards@thewayofhorses.com) or (440) 554-3714. Be sure to visit Eleanor's web site at [www.thewayofhorses.com](http://www.thewayofhorses.com)