



Winter Management

Managing horses and ponies during the long winter months can be somewhat difficult when faced with the unpredictable British weather. The thought of long, dark nights, sub-zero temperatures, frost and snow is enough to send anyone into panic. Here we discuss different management practices and ways in which horses are best able to cope with the winter forecast.

Nutrition and water

A horse has evolved to graze between 16-18 hours¹ per day upon forages such as grass, hay or haylage which are high in fibre. Digestion occurs predominantly within the hindgut via fermentation, during which, heat is produced which helps keep the body warm during the colder months. Forages produce more heat during fermentation than other feedstuffs like hard feeds, therefore, it's important that horses have suitable quantities of forage available, and that it's spread out across the paddock to reduce the risk of fighting and injuries.

Purely increasing hard feed during winter is not advisable as this can lead to further health issues such as colic, obesity and laminitis. Feeding a vitamin and mineral supplement or a feed balancer is often recommended due to the nutritional content of grazing likely to be very poor. As a general rule, a horse's daily feed intake should be approximately 2.5% of their bodyweight¹; however, this can be affected by breed, age, current weight and workload. As with any changes to a horse's diet, these should be made gradually over a few days to reduce the

risk of colic. With so many different feeds and products on the market, it can sometimes be difficult to know what to feed; for expert advice, a majority of feed manufacturers now have feed helplines who will be more than happy to help.

Water is just as important in the cold as it is during the warmer months; horses can often drink more water in the winter when they're being fed dried forages such as hay. Troughs should be checked regularly each day to ensure that it hasn't frozen during sub-zero temperatures.

To rug or not to rug?

Horses have evolved over the years to naturally fluctuate their weights through the year to their advantage. During the spring and summer months, horses and particularly native pony types pile on a few extra pounds as fat reserves that can be used as an energy store during adverse weather and when grazing is sparse to help keep them warm. However, this fluctuation

shouldn't be extreme, and they should still sit between a 2 and 3 on the Body Condition Score Scale (0-5).

For more details please see our Body Condition Score resource.

If a horse is rugged unnecessarily, this natural process of weight loss is prevented leading to long-term obesity and further health complications in the future.

Not every horse will require a rug during the winter.

Whether a rug is required or not will depend upon a number of different factors, such as the breed, age, living conditions, workload and health status of the horse. Native types such as Shetlands and Welsh Ponies are usually well adapted to living in colder conditions by growing a thick winter coat, full of natural oils. Excessive grooming can remove these important oils which act as a natural barrier to protect the horse from the elements. Other breeds such as Warmbloods and Thoroughbreds, with finer coats, are more likely to struggle and would benefit from suitable rugs.

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Working horses generally will have their coats clipped out to prevent them becoming sweaty and uncomfortable, these horses, alongside the elderly and those suffering from ill-health will benefit from the added protection of a rug. Those that are rugged should have them removed at least once a day to check for any signs of rubbing or skin irritation. Care must be taken not to over-rug a horse, as horses can easily overheat and sweat through non-breathable rug fabrics leading to weight loss and potential chills once the horse has cooled down.

Stabling and shelter

Many owners bring horses into stables overnight during the winter as added protection, however, this is not always necessary and doesn't suit every horse. A large number of horses are quite happy to live out all year round, as long as suitable shelter and forage are provided.

Out in the paddocks, shelter should be provided to allow horses to get away from the elements should they want to. This could be natural shelter from trees or hedging, or a man-made shelter, providing there is sufficient space for the herd. These should be professionally installed, be of suitable quality and appropriately secured, to ensure that they are able to withstand all weather conditions.

Stables should be well-ventilated, providing adequate space for the size and type of horse, but free from draughts. Suitable bedding should be provided and the area should be kept clean to avoid the build-up of ammonia, which can cause respiratory health problems. It's recommended that stabled horses should have turnout each day to allow them to exhibit

natural behaviours and reduce the physical and mental stress placed upon them by being confined.

Paddock maintenance

During wet weather, it's inevitable that there will be mud around; particularly around gateways, water troughs and hay feeders. These areas are most at risk of suffering from subsequent poaching. Prolonged exposure to wet and muddy conditions can lead to skin irritation due to bacterial and fungal infections – most commonly mud fever.

Using hardcore or specialist paddock mats around these areas can prevent both damage to the pasture, but also avoid these health concerns. Rotational grazing methods can be used to reduce the impact of poaching, however, if this is not possible, designating a well-draining sacrifice field may be necessary for the duration of the winter months.

Checking for, and removing sycamore seeds, seedlings and acorns is important to reduce the risk of poisoning. If these trees are found within your paddocks, these areas should be fenced off.

Fencing should be checked daily to ensure that paddocks are secure, and no damage has occurred which could lead to the escape or injury of your horses. Automatic water troughs should also be checked regularly for leaks and make sure they're filling during the colder temperatures.

Preparation is key

Before winter sets in and routines aren't taking up most of your time, it gives you the opportunity to plan how you intend to manage your horses and organise the supplies that might be needed. Sourcing forage and bedding of

suitable quality and cost early ensures you can get stocked up before the bad weather hits. Also, checking that suitable rugs are cleaned and waterproofed can prevent unwanted surprises later on!

Having a supply of grit and salt is also recommended to keep yards and walkways free from ice to avoid both horse and owner from slipping and injuring themselves.

Considerations should be made for what you'd do if you can't make it to the yard due to adverse weather conditions and how your horse's needs will be taken care of.

If temperatures are set to drop so low that pipes and taps are likely to be frozen solid, it can often be a good idea to keep a few canisters or buckets filled with water in the tack or feed room to use in these situations.

Summary

Although the weather can be unpredictable, it's important to plan ahead of time before winter sets in. Each horse is different and its ability to cope in the colder months will vary depending on any number of factors discussed above, which will impact their management.

If you need any further information on winter management, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us below.

References:

1 – *Dengie Crops Ltd. (2019). Weight Gain & Condition.*