

10 WINTER HEALTH CARE MISTAKES TO AVOID

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The days are drawing in and your thin-skinned Thoroughbred is going to be outside in the worst of the winter. While you may be envious of those with warm barns and an unlimited cover fund, don't panic. Your horse will fare just as well with a bit of common sense than with too much over coddling. That said, abandoning him for the entire winter probably isn't the right answer either!

Here are ten winter horse-keeping mistakes to avoid and therefore ensure your horse remains healthy and happy all season:

1. **NEGLECTING YOUR OWN HEALTH**
I think most horse owners will put their horse's health ahead of their own! Just remember, if you are not fit and well, you will not be able to adequately care for your horse. It is pretty important to stay warm, stay safe and stay healthy when there is someone depending on you every day.
2. **THROWING YOUR HORSE IN A Paddock AND FORGETTING ABOUT HIM**
The old saying goes "no rest for the horseman." Yes, it might be freezing outside and, yes, you may be giving your horse a well-earned break over the winter months but you still need to keep up with basic care. Checking water, feeding, grooming and whatever else needs doing, to ensure your horse remains happy and healthy.
3. **LACK OF HOOF CARE**
Nothing will wind up a good farrier more than an owner who insists on ignoring hoof care during the winter months. Horses - shod or otherwise, in work or not - need regular blacksmith care every six to eight weeks, maybe even more often, regardless of the season. Period, the end!
4. **NO BEAUTY TREATMENT**
Even if you are not riding during the winter, groom your horse regularly. This is your best opportunity to check your horse over and can alert you to problems such as illness, injury, weight loss, lost shoe, cracked hooves et cetera before they escalate into major issues. It's up to us, as owners, to intervene as quickly as possible when something is wrong. Catching a problem early on helps put your horse back on the track to good health. This is all part of your basic 'horsemanship' skills.
5. **LETTING HIS WATER FREEZE OVER**
A horse cannot stay properly hydrated if his water is frozen. While he may be reluctant to drink as much in the cooler days, don't think that snow and ice are a substitute for clean, unfrozen drinking water. With dehydration, your horse's risk of impaction colic is greatly increased. While this is not so much of a problem from the Waikato upwards, those of us further south might need to add ice breaking to our list of chores over the winter.
6. **NOT INCREASING FOOD INTAKE WHEN TEMPERATURES DIP**
Some horses seem to lose weight overnight as temperatures drop. In these conditions your horse will burn more calories to stay warm. Treat each horse as an individual and assess regularly what their particular needs are. Winter covers can hide nasty surprises. Adding extra fibre in the form of hay is a good cost effective way of warming him up from the inside. The process of digesting this fibre occurs in the hindgut, and helps keep a horse warmer.
7. **NO EXERCISE**
Not such a biggie in New Zealand where, in the main, our horses graze outside. However, locking him in a stable all winter with no exercise is not a good idea for a horse. If you are not inclined to continue riding through the winter and will be stabling your horse, keep his mind and muscles active with lungeing or let him play in a safe yard during the day.
8. **OVERRIDING AN OUT OF SHAPE HORSE**
If you are a good weather rider only, it is likely you won't be doing all that much riding from one week to the next over the winter. If your horse is kept fit in other ways this is less of a problem but, if he is an inside warm and dry guy most of the time, take care when you do ride him – an out of shape horse is at a greater risk of injuring himself if you work him too hard. In these instances, stick to lighter exercise which won't overdo things and gradually increase the level as his fitness improves.
9. **IMPOUNDING YOUR HORSE IN A STABLE**
Most horses will stay healthier and fitter if they are left outdoors for the winter, with a few basic provisos: all horses must have some shelter from the elements. A shelter with a roof is ideal, although a good windbreak or a nice tree will suffice. If you do box your horse, try to leave him out during the day and only bring him in at night. And don't close the stable block up if it is barn style! As long as the barn is not built facing the prevailing wind, leave it open to ensure good airflow inside. Poor air quality can affect a horse's respiratory health.
10. **OVER BLANKETING**
It's hard not to feel sorry for your horse when its sub zero outside and you're indoors enjoying a warm dinner by the fire. To ease your guilty conscience, you might be tempted to rush out and pile yet another cover on him. While most horses will appreciate a good cover over winter and a clipped horse (full or part) will certainly need at least one, try and avoid over doing it. Too many covers can cause a horse to overheat, which leads to dehydration and many other health problems. What may be comfortable for him overnight may well be far too hot during the day. Provided your horse is sheltered and in good health, he possibly doesn't need all those rugs!