



WINTER WARMTH

DAYS ARE SHORTENING AND THE NIGHTS ARE CLOSING IN....

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With the days shortening and the nights closing in, it is time to ensure our equine companions are well catered for over the harsher months. While thankfully the majority of New Zealand horses are not subjected to extremely cold snowy, icy conditions for extended periods, the effects of wind chill and very wet ground can be even more detrimental to their health if not managed properly.

While we are inside warm and dry, how do we know if our horses are comfortable and warm? Some horses are lucky enough to be stabled in inclement conditions but, for many, a muddy paddock is as good as it gets.

Some horses grow winter coats to rival a yak, while others hardly change at all. Some horses seem to appear fluffier overnight! (This phenomenon tends to coincide with our Horse of the Year Show in NZ!). While it may appear that your horse's hair has doubled overnight, in reality it hasn't. What has happened is, his coat is insulating as it

should – by standing on end - the warm air becomes trapped against the horse, thus keeping him warmer.

The trigger for horses, that winter is coming, is the shortening of the day rather than the cooler temperatures. Clipping is often not the desired look in the show ring – this is why showies and others wanting to manipulate nature will put their horses under lights to slow down the onset of the winter woollies. The horse naturally will begin to grow his winter coat as soon as the days begin to shorten, so that by the time winter sets in he is ready to deflect the elements.

A good fur coat and some underlying fat will insulate your horse sufficiently to survive the winter well. Sheds, shelters or even a good wind breaking tree or hedge will be extra bonuses for the average horse.

Where we strike added problems in the winter is with old horses, thin horses, or any other horse that is not a good doer. The effects of winter will serve only to exacerbate your problems. These horses

require extra coddling in the form of feed (high fibre feeds such as hay are preferable to warm the horse up from the inside out), stabling if possible (only at night is ideal, remember he is still a horse and will get cabin fever if you restrict him too much) and careful rugging to maintain the warmth you create.

Nowadays there are any number of rugs, covers and blankets on the market designed to keep your horse even warmer than he would naturally be and the benefits of these are obvious – less feed and hay is required to keep him warm than would be the case without a cover. You can check his temperature easily by putting your hand up under his cover. If he is toasty warm and dry then he is just fine. If he is damp or sweaty, then either he needs a more waterproof cover or is too hot. Neither is ideal.

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If you choose to stable your horse over the winter or during the worst weather, the time to be most alert is when you release him from the confines of his box. Icy, wet or muddy conditions underfoot and a horse tasting his freedom for the first time in days, are not a good combination. If possible, either turn him into a smaller yard to let off steam or let him go once you have given him some work or exercise. This should preserve his safety – some horses are not big on self protection – as well as protecting your paddocks from the equivalent of a plough!

Fibre is the feed of choice to maintain warmth. While a hot bran mash might seem a kind thing to do, in reality it is only going to warm him up for a very short period. Likewise, feeds such as fats and grains will help but the warmth your horse derives from these feeds will not last as long as that he will get from fibre such as hay. The reason for this is that fibre is digested slowly, heat is generated from the microbial fermentation occurring and that heat is sustained for quite a long time. While the exact amount of fibre to feed will vary from horse to horse, an extra slice of hay on a cold day is a good rule of thumb.

It is also important to ensure your horse’s water intake continues in the winter. The more water you can encourage into him in the winter the better. It is very important not to leave his trough iced over, or assume that he has plenty of water because it is snowing! Your horse’s natural reaction when it is cooler is to drink less, however the likelihood of impaction colic seems to increase in the winter months and less water is the likely culprit. A good purpose for a bran mash or other similar recipe such as sugar beet can be to ensure your horse gets that bit of extra fluid!

By and large, following these common sense steps will keep your horse healthy and happy through the winter. So relax and stop feeling guilty when you look out the window! There is no real need to dress your horse as though he is mounting an expedition to the North Pole or freeze yourself blue trying to maximise his comfort levels. With your horse’s natural abilities and a little assistance from you, you can both settle down and enjoy a warm, safe and happy winter.



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