**WINTERIZE YOUR HORSE**



As winter approaches and temperatures drop, horse owners need to consider how to winterize their horses. During the cold season, horse owners must make sure that their animals receive proper feed, water and shelter to stay healthy and comfortable.

Feeding

Many horse owners believe that when the weather is cold, horses need to be fed rations containing more corn, because they think of corn as a heating feed. However, corn and other cereal grains do not cause the horse to become warmer, they simply provide more energy (calories) to the horse. Hay, which contains more fiber than grain, provides more of a warming effect internally, as more heat is released during the digestion of fiber than of starch from grain. Therefore, horses are more able to maintain body heat if adequate hay is provided in the diet. Further, good quality hay is important during cool weather and winter months when pasture grasses are short or are not growing. Horses need at least 1% of their body weight per day in roughages to maintain a healthy GI tract, but 2% or even more may be appropriate during cold weather, especially when the horse lives outdoors.

Although grain does not provide as much internal warming effect as hay, it is often necessary to increase a horse’s concentrate feed to boost calorie supplies. Cold temperatures increase the amount of calories a horse needs to maintain body weight, as well as support activity or production. Because a horse may digest feed less efficiently as the temperature drops below the horse's comfort zone, additional feed may be required to maintain body weight and condition. It is important to maintain the horse in a body condition score of 5-6 (moderate to moderately fleshy) because a layer of fat under the skin provides insulation against the cold. Further, horses in moderately fleshy condition require less dietary energy for maintenance in cold weather than thin horses. In general, feeding an additional 1/4 lb of grain per 100 lb body weight to nonworking horses will provide adequate calories during cold, windy and wet weather. Working horses may require up to an additional 1/2 lb per 100 lb body weight, depending on workload, to maintain body weight during cold weather. Higher calorie feeds such as our AMF Complete Horse 13% or Complete Horse 16% may be especially helpful in these situations.

Senior horses, which may be unable to chew hay completely due to poor teeth and suffer from less efficient digestion and absorption of nutrients, need a feed specifically designed for them such as our AMF Old Timer especially during winter months. Old Timer contains enough roughage and added fat to ensure that the older horse can meet its fiber and calorie requirements without depending on long-stemmed hay or grass.

Water

Water should always be readily available to the horse. Ideally, the water temperature should be between 45 degrees and 65 degrees Fahrenheit. If water is too cold, the horse may drink less, thereby decreasing water and lubrication in the gut and increasing the chance of impaction-induced colic. Further, if the horse drinks less water, it may also eat less feed, resulting in loss of body weight and condition. Finally, if a horse is forced to drink very cold water, its energy requirement will increase, because more calories are required to warm the water to body temperature inside the digestive tract.

Shelter

Another consideration in cold weather horse care is housing or shelter. In general, even in cold climates, horses are happier and possibly healthier outdoors. Closed and heated barns are often inadequately ventilated. Horses living in poorly ventilated stables tend to develop respiratory diseases more often than horses maintained in pastures, even during cold weather.

If given the opportunity, horses adjust to cold temperatures with little difficulty. A horse's comfort zone is very different from that of a person. In the absence of wind or moisture, horses tolerate temperatures down to near 0 degrees Fahrenheit, and even colder if shelter is available. Horses living outside should have access to adequate shelter from wind, sleet and storms. Trees, brush, or an open-sided shed or stable can provide adequate shelter. In severe cold, horses will group together to share body heat. They may all take a brisk run to increase heat production, and then come back together to share the increased warmth. A long thick coat of hair is an excellent insulator and is the horse's first line of defense against cold temperatures. Horses that live outdoors during the winter should be allowed to grow a natural, full winter coat. Horses that live indoors will need adequate blankets in the cold weather to ensure that they do not get too cold.

With sufficient thought and care by the horse owner, even horses that live outside in very cold climates will survive quite well during the cold winter months.  And now, everybody go enjoy the cold!

Adopted from a post on Purina Horse Blog by [Mary Beth Gordon, Ph.D.](http://www.blogger.com/profile/12912106821770777989) , edited by Kimberly McCourtney, Sales Manager Alaska Garden & Pet Supply, Inc.