

# Bedding for stabled horses

Bedding is used to provide warmth and comfort and prevent injury whilst in the stable. It encourages the horse to lie down and rest as well as to urinate, helping to maintain normal kidney function.

Bedding is usually considered to be one of two types: drainage material or absorbent material. Examples of bedding materials which are considered to be absorbent include wood shavings and paper. Bedding materials which are considered to afford drainage include straws of different types. When selecting which type of bedding to use, the drainage efficiency of the stable should be considered with stables that have poor drainage being better served by absorbent bedding.

## **Straw**

There are three main types of straw, Oat, Barley and Wheat. Straw beds have a clean, bright appearance and keep the horse warm. Straw is also very protective and stops the horse from injuring himself when rolling in the stable. Another advantage is that straw manure can be disposed of easier than other types of bedding and can be good value in a good harvest year. Straw allows urine to drain through the bedding.

Disadvantages of straw bedding include that it can be heavy to muck out and depending on the quality, it can be dusty. Some horses will eat straw bedding which is a problem for horses which are overweight or prone to impaction colic.

## **Deep Litter Straw**

This system is often used on yards with a large number of horses. Droppings are removed from the stable and fresh bedding added on top. It is important that beds do not become too deep and the stable should periodically be completely emptied and thoroughly cleaned. Deep litter is more economical and is labour saving for staff.

With deep litter bedding, decomposing urine and faeces cause ammonia to be produced which can cause respiratory health problems for the horse, highlighting the importance of good stable management. Horses kept on deep litter systems will be exposed to higher levels of ammonia compared with a horse that is fully mucked out daily. However, when removing droppings there is less disturbance of the bed, so fewer fungal spores and less dust is released into the atmosphere on a daily basis. Deep litter bedding can also become unsightly if not managed well, affecting the overall look of the yard.

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## Shavings

The quality of wood shavings varies greatly, particularly in respect of the dust content. Dust extracted shavings are the most popular as they are of a higher quality and have a low dust content. Shavings will not be eaten by the horse, therefore his fitness and weight will not be affected. When mucking out, shavings are lighter to work with than straw and baled shavings are convenient as they can be easily stored and can be left stacked outside. Shavings are an absorbent bedding which can be used on an uneven floor with limited drainage.

Shavings however, can be more expensive and can be difficult to dispose of as they take longer to decompose than other types of bedding. They also should not be used for horses with open wounds.



## Paper

The key advantages of paper are that it is a dust-free and non-palatable bedding material. However, the long paper strips tend to be harder to muck out as they can stick together and become difficult to separate from the droppings. Bales usually come wrapped in polythene making them easy to store. Paper is one of the cheaper types of bedding, but a large number of bales may be needed to create a thick bed and ink can also stain a light coloured coat. When wet, paper can become less user-friendly and very soggy.

## Rubber Matting

Rubber matting fulfils a number of functions including providing cushioning on the floor, helping to prevent injury and reducing the amount of bedding material required. Rubber matting usually comes in the form of rubber tiles that fit together like a jigsaw and can reduce the amount of bedding which is needed. Although initially expensive, rubber matting can be viewed as a long-term investment. Rubber matting provides excellent support for the horse's hooves and limbs and minimises the risk of injury as it covers the concrete floor and provides better grip. It is recommended that some bedding is used along with rubber matting.

The stabled horse's hooves should be picked out every day, but ideally twice a day as a matter of good practice. Dry, clean bedding also helps to eliminate the risk of thrush in the hoof. Thrush is a foul smelling bacterial infection which can be caused by horses standing in wet, dirty bedding. Again, good stable management will go a long way to prevent the infection.