

MANAGING WINTER AILMENTS

Many horses experience a change of routine as the weather gets colder. Horses who previously spent the summer out at grass are suddenly spending up to 24 hours a day standing in a stable. This change of routine brings its challenges. Indeed, the sudden change in diet from grass to hay/haylage can cause an increase in incidence of colic in the winter, especially impaction colics. Lack of movement also contributes to this. To prevent your horse having problems, ideally change their diet and routine slowly over 10-14 days. Plenty of forage is vital for a healthy digestive system and using hay nets will help prevent boredom whilst stabled.

Reduced turnout also causes “stocking up” where reduced lymphatic drainage in the limbs causes horses legs to swell. This is caused by lack of movement as the lymphatic system relies on muscle contraction to move lymph around the body. Try to ensure your horse is getting access to turnout during the day where possible and sufficient exercise to prevent this swelling.

Horses that live out during the winter are also subject to seasonal ailments. One of the most common winter ailments in horses is mud fever. This condition is caused by bacteria infecting the skin and it prevails in warm, damp environments. The old adage rings true that “prevention is better than cure” so it is imperative that we keep our horses legs as clean and dry as possible. If your horse becomes infected with mud fever, the best treatment is to clean, clip and dry the legs. First remove any scabs and then use an antibacterial soap such as chlorhexidine to wash the legs. Always consult the safety data sheet and be aware of any “Control of Substances Hazardous to Health” (COSHH) precautions when using any veterinary medications or washes. Clipping away feathers will help the legs to dry faster and drying the legs is the most important step. If the mud fever persists, contact your vet as you may need an antibacterial or steroid cream. The sooner you treat mud fever, the easier it is to combat.

Muddy wet conditions also affect hoof quality. Horses are more prone to losing shoes in wet, muddy fields and conditions like thrush and foot abscesses see an increase in incidence. Thrush is characterised by a foul smell and black discharge from the frog. Regularly picking out hooves and keeping them clean and dry should help prevent these ailments. Similarly, foot abscesses thrive in damp conditions and are characterised by sudden onset lameness and heat in

the hoof. Keeping your horses feet clean and dry is an important preventative measure.

Another very common winter ailment in horses living out at pasture is rain scald. It is a skin infection caused by the same bacteria as mud fever, characterised by scabs and hair loss. It is common in both rugged and non-rugged horses as sweating under rugs can also be a predisposing factor. Cleaning with chlorhexidine scrub and clipping and drying should be curative. Field shelters can help reduce the risk of constant wetting and infection occurring.

Respiratory problems are common in horses and although they can happen at any time of year, are more common in winter due to increased time spent stabled. Dust is a big factor so store dusty items like shavings, straw and hay away from the barn where horses are kept. If dust in hay is a problem, consider soaking hay overnight before feeding to horses. Ensure adequate ventilation in barns and keep windows and barn doors open where possible.

Dehydration is usually associated with summer months but it can be a problem in winter as well. Ideally, you check your horses' water supply twice daily to ensure that it has not frozen. Horses tend to drink less when the water is ice cold so you may want to add hot water to encourage your horse to drink. Insulated buckets are also a good way to help regulate water temperature. Salt licks provided in the stable are another good option to encourage your horse to drink.

Horses use more energy during the winter to keep warm. Rugging horses is a good way to ensure clipped horses can regulate their body temperature but rugged horses need to be checked every day. Removing the rug allows you to inspect the horses' body condition score so that less than ideal conditions can



be corrected. Senior horses may find it difficult to maintain condition during winter so may need additional forage provided.

Injuries associated with slipping on ice or snow can occur in horses as well as humans. Removing your horses' shoes for winter can provide more traction and help prevent accidents. Treat any areas prone to ice with salt or sand to provide grip and remove snow from commonly used walkways to keep them as slip-free as possible.

Overall, winter can be a challenging time for horse ownership but by recognising the role that our own management choices make, we can help ensure our horses stay healthy and happy.