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## Winterizing your Horse

Preparing for winter does not look the same for each species of livestock. Horses do quite well in the cold even if they live outside. A three-sided shelter will provide protection from the elements, and a clean place to lie down will help conserve body heat on a cold night. Ensuring proper diet, water intake and exercise level will help your horse stay healthy all winter long.

Just because energy needs are increased due to low temps, it's not enough to just dump more grain out to your horse. Hay is the best way to increase the amount of energy consumed. The natural fiber fermentation process that occurs in the hindgut produces heat, which will help maintain warmth. If forage quality is poor, a ration balancer can be used to provide balanced vitamins and minerals.

An increase in dietary forage demands an increase in water intake. The average adult horse needs about 10 gallons of water daily. Horses are known to eat snow, but they usually don't eat enough to satisfy their water needs. If you have a picky drinker, keep the water source clean and ice free. Provide free choice salt year-round. Be sure the water source is large enough for more than one steed to drink at a time. Other ways to increase water consumption include soaking grain, beet pulp or hay cubes with warm water or adding flavor like peppermint oil. Electrolyte supplementation can also encourage drinking but shouldn't be done every day.

A working horse through the winter will likely sweat, calling for different care to prevent chills that could lead to hypothermia. A fleece or wool cooler should be placed over the horse when exercise is finished and left in place until the coat is dry. If the horse is blanketed, ensure that the coat is dry before putting the blanket back on. Blanketing over a sweaty, wet coat can worsen a chill. If exercise remains a steady part of your winter routine, clipping the coat is one way to reduce excess sweating.

Should your horse have a blanket? Imagine snow on his back. If the snow is just sitting there, no problem, but when it melts and your horse's coat gets wet, heat is lost. A fleece or wool cooler will allow the coat to dry without too much heat loss. Older horses or those that have trouble keeping weight on can benefit from the added warmth of a blanket. Blanketing will help these horses conserve energy and stay warm. Horses that are stabled and used to a warm barn will also appreciate a blanket when heading out into bitter winds. The first step in blanketing your horse is to determine the proper size. Using a flexible measuring tape, measure the length of your horse from the center of the chest, along the side to the point of rump, just next to where the tail lies.

Once you start blanketing, the practice will need to continue until the weather warms up. Blanketing can flatten the coat, reducing its insulating ability. Stalled and blanketed horses need vigilance. Remove blankets every few days to check for sores and to ensure that your horse isn't losing condition.

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