

Keeping Your Horse Warm In Winter

Caring for Your Horse in Winter

When the chilly winds start to blow, you might wonder how your horse is coping. Luckily, most horses are quite resilient and can handle the cold weather fairly well. However, factors like their age, breed, health, and routine care can mean some horses need a little extra TLC.



Understanding Your Horse's Needs

Horses are naturally equipped to live outdoors, and they're pretty good at regulating their body temperature, especially if they have access to suitable shelter. But if you have a young foal, an elderly horse, or a thoroughbred, you might want to consider giving them a cozy rug or adding some extra feed to their diet. Always think about what your specific horse needs to stay happy and healthy.

How Cold is Too Cold?



Interestingly, horses don't feel the cold quite like we do. With their thick winter coats, they're comfortable in temperatures ranging from about 5 to 25 degrees Celsius. You might feel chilly, but your horse might be just fine! We often overdo it with the rugs, thinking if we're cold, they must be too, but that's not usually the case.

Daily Check-ins are Key

No matter the season, it's essential to check in on your horse regularly. In winter, keep an eye out for signs of discomfort. Check their coat for any rubbing from rugs, look for changes in their weight, and watch for signs of mud fever. It's all about being proactive.

Signs Your Horse Might Be Cold



You know your horse best, but if you notice any of the following signs, it might be time to reassess their comfort level in the cold:

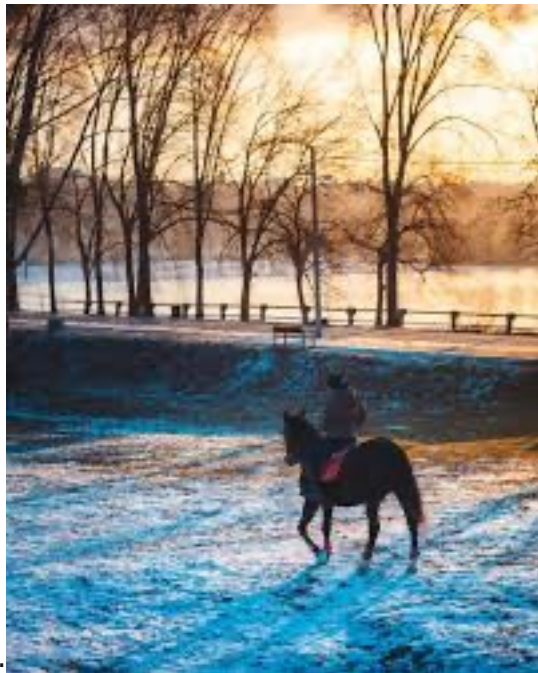
- They seem more tired or lethargic than usual.
- They're standing with their head lowered, away from the wind.
- Their skin feels cold to the touch, especially under their rug.
- They've lost interest in food.
- Their behaviour has changed; they might seem a bit down.
- You see extreme shivering or signs of colic.

Weight Checks Matter

It's normal for horses to lose a bit of weight during the winter months, but don't just crank up their feed automatically. If you notice a significant drop, it might mean they're struggling to keep warm or have a health issue brewing. A quick chat with your vet can help clarify what's normal for your horse. Keeping a weight tape handy and regularly checking their body score can make a big difference.

Feeding During Winter

One of the ways horses generate warmth is through their food. Grazing on fibre-rich forage helps keep their internal furnace running! Ensure they always have access to good pasture and hay. Most horses won't need extra feed, but if your horse is particularly young, old, or working hard, they might benefit from a specialised diet. And if the grass is frosty, don't worry—horses can warm it up in their mouths before



swallowing.

Supplementary Feeding Tips

If you find your horse losing weight due to lower grass quality, it's okay to provide some additional feed. Younger, older, or thoroughbred horses may require specific diets to meet their needs, especially if they're in regular work. Just remember to introduce any changes gradually—sudden shifts can lead to digestive troubles.

Water Supply is Essential

Fresh water is crucial, even in winter. Make sure your horse's water supply isn't frozen! Placing buckets in tires filled with hay can help slow down freezing. If you have automatic drinkers, remember they can freeze, so turning them off can prevent pipes from bursting. Horses tend to drink less in the cold, which can lead to impaction colic, so keep an eye on their hydration and provide warm water to encourage drinking.

Rugging Your Horse

Horses naturally grow thicker coats in winter, so they often don't need rugs. They can stay warm by moving around, munching on hay, and even shivering a bit. If you do need to rug them, choose an appropriate weight and make sure to check daily. Remember, over-rugging can lead to overheating, which can cause discomfort and health issues.



Signs Your Horse Might Be Overheating

If you suspect your horse is too warm under their rug, watch for these signs:

- Their skin feels sweaty or moist.
- They seem restless or unhappy.
- They start kicking or biting at their rug.
- They rub against objects or roll excessively.
- Their appetite decreases.
- They have a faster breathing rate.

Creating a Safe Environment

Shelter is a must in any weather, but it's especially important during cold, wet, and windy days. Make sure your field shelters are in good condition, and consider adding windbreaks like hedges or trees. When moving horses to new pastures, do it in the morning while there's still light, and always avoid placing food and water in muddy spots to prevent churn.

Dealing with Mud Fever and Rain Scald

Mud fever can be a nuisance in winter, as it thrives in cold, damp conditions. Keep an eye out for scabs or swelling on your horse's legs, and manage muddy areas by rotating pastures. If you bring your horse in, let their legs dry and brush off any mud instead of washing it off. Applying barrier creams can help prevent mud sticking to their legs.

Rain scald, which can occur on your horse's neck and back, is also caused by wet conditions. Regular checks for scabs and swelling are key here too. Ensure they have adequate shelter and avoid over-grooming to maintain the natural oils in their coat.

Snowballing and Stabling Your Horse



Snow can create clumps under your horse's hooves, especially if they're shod. To prevent this, apply a layer of petroleum jelly to the soles and inside the shoes, but make sure to remove it afterward to avoid bacteria buildup.

When it comes to stabling, keeping your horse out as much as possible is best for their natural behaviour. Most horses will handle the cold just fine, but those who are clipped, lighter breeds, or older may need to come in at night. Make sure their bedding is clean, dry, and enriched with activities to keep them happy.



Riding and Working in Winter

If you plan to ride, always wear reflective gear and carry a phone for emergencies. Cold, brisk winds can make horses skittish, so be extra cautious while handling them. Avoid riding in foggy or icy conditions, and let your horse cool down gradually after a workout. A cooler blanket can help maintain their body temperature.

Prepare for Extreme Weather

It's wise to have a plan in place for severe weather, like snow or flooding. Think about how you'd handle the situation—who would help, and do they have all the necessary information? Most stables have protocols, so it's a good idea to discuss your plans with your yard manager.