

## **Winterize Your Horse**

*By Dr. Katie Young, Equine Nutritionist, Purina Mills, LLC*

Now that winter is approaching and the temperature is dropping, 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. Further, since riders usually put a lot of time and effort into getting their horses ready for shows, trail rides, or other events during the warm months, if they maintain their horses over the winter, all that effort won't go to waste and have to be started over in the spring.

### **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 of an internal warming effect as hay, it is often necessary to supplement a horse's winter ration with additional grain 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. Feeds such as Purina Ultium, Strategy, Race Ready or Omolene 200 may be especially helpful in these situations, since the added fat provides more calories than grain alone.

Senior horses, which are unable to chew hay completely due to poor teeth and suffer from less efficient digestion and absorption of nutrients in the GI tract, need a feed specifically designed for them such as Equine Senior especially during winter months. Equine Senior 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. Snow is not a sufficient substitute for water, as the horse cannot physically eat enough snow to meet its water requirement. Ideally, the temperature of the available water should be between 45 degrees and 65 degrees Fahrenheit. If the 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.

## Exercise

Many horses are given the winter off from work due to the cold weather, the rider's lack of time, or because they are given a break after a heavy show season. However, if horses are let off for too long, they may forget some of what they have been taught and lose the fitness level that they gained over the year of work. So, to prevent the winter slump, here are a few suggestions:

1. Longe the horse once or twice a week. This not only gets the horse exercising, but it gives you an opportunity to brush, clean feet, check for injury, and evaluate the overall condition of the horse.
2. If longeing is not possible and you have more than one horse, you can ride one and pony the second. This can be a good time saver and gets both horses working.
3. If time is available and weather permits, ride your horse or horses whenever possible. Keep in mind, your horse is not in the same shape and does not have the stamina as when you were riding more in the warmer seasons, so you cannot work as hard nor expect as much from the horse. Be sure to cool the horse down completely after work to reduce the risk of pneumonia, cold, or colic.
4. Another option is to check with local stables to see if their facilities are available to non-boarders. Often, stables allow outside horses and riders to use indoor and/or outdoor arenas for a fee.

Winter may not be the easiest time of year for enjoying our horses, but with proper feed, water and shelter, and some exercise and conditioning, our horses will make it through comfortably and be ready to go again as soon as the weather allows.