

Cold-Weather Diets

Those cold winter months of mud, slush, and frozen ground...owners dread them, while feed dealers, anticipating increased sales, may look forward to them. The horses? For the most part, they don't seem to care, and in fact, many seem to be energized by the crisp air and chilly breezes.

While very young, very old, or ailing horses may need specific changes in stable routine, healthy horses with an intact coat can usually tolerate winter weather with few problems if owners pay attention to basic feeding and management principles.

Water. If it's not the most important winter consideration, water is at least near the top of the list. Even when the horse is not working and sweating, water consumption is necessary to prevent impaction of ingested material in the intestinal tract. Horses naturally tend to drink somewhat less water when the temperature drops, so every effort should be made to ensure sufficient intake. Owners can start with these management steps:

- Provide a constant supply of clean water that is not too cold. Experts disagree on the exact "favorite" water temperature. Horses will drink water that is quite cold, but they tend to ingest a larger amount when water is warmed to around 45 or 50 degrees F. Water that is hot to the touch is not suitable.
- Make sure water sources aren't frozen, either by using insulated buckets, installing an electric heater, or frequently providing warmed water. NOTE: being shocked will back horses off a water tank, even if they are extremely thirsty. If you have a heated water tank that horses are not using, check and check again (use an extremely sensitive voltmeter, or schedule a visit from an electrician) to be certain there is no "stray" voltage. Some horses will react to voltage that is too slight for humans to detect, while other horses (and most cattle) don't seem to be bothered.
- Adding water to feed, giving occasional bran mashes, and sprinkling salt on feed to stimulate a thirst response are all useful techniques, but these measures by themselves may not ensure adequate water intake. Also, don't count on horses eating snow to stay hydrated. Melting snow in the mouth and stomach uses so much energy that it's difficult for the horse to maintain a safe body temperature.

Hay. Fermentation of fiber in the horse's hindgut is the major heat source that keeps horses comfortable through the colder months. Therefore, a steady supply of hay is crucial. While many horses continue to graze some pasture, hay usually provides the majority of winter forage. Type and amount of hay will vary depending on a horse's size, metabolism, and workload. At a minimum, start with the basic guideline of feeding enough hay to equal about 1.5 % to 2% of the horse's body weight (around 15 to 20 pounds a day for a horse weighing 1000 pounds), and increase as needed when the temperature drops.

- Easy keepers and horses doing minimal work get along well on medium-quality grass hay (can contain a few weeds, may have been cut when a little more mature than optimum).

- Horses with average metabolisms will do better on good-quality grass hay (mostly free of weeds, made from grass that was not over-mature at cutting).
- Heavily exercised horses or those with special needs (older horses, thin horses, horses recovering from illness) may need a grass-legume mix or even a straight alfalfa hay.

As a general rule, shivering horses that regularly clean up every scrap of hay probably need to have their hay ration increased. Horses that simply enjoy eating will also consume every flake in sight, but increasing their ration is not a good idea. You can tell the difference by using a weight tape every few weeks through the winter to track changes, uncovering the situation of heavy-coated horses that appear fat when they are actually losing weight. Likewise, horses that leave some hay untouched may seem to have been overfed, but it is also possible they are leaving weeds, rough plants, or flakes containing mold. Inspect the rejected material and purchase better-quality hay if necessary.

Stalled horses have plenty of time to pick through their hay, munching a few mouthfuls now and then as the hours pass. Pastured horses that eat hay in a group setting need to be monitored to be sure that low-status animals have adequate access to hay. Very timid horses may need to be fed hay separately or in smaller groups. Spacing hay piles widely in the field and offering several extra piles can minimize this problem.

Concentrates. Winter diets usually include concentrates for two reasons: nutrients and energy. Hay and dormant grasses don't have the same nutritional value as fresh pasture, and this lack can be overcome by feeding a fortified sweet feed or pelleted product. Concentrates also pack a lot more energy than grass or hay, and horses that are eating plenty of good-quality hay and are still not maintaining their weight may need additional calories in cold, windy, damp weather.

As with hay selection, the type of concentrate depends on the individual horse, and most feed dealers offer a variety of choices to meet the needs of young, mature, old, working, or breeding horses. Feeds containing beet pulp or soy hulls, so-called super fibers, include highly digestible fiber along with more traditional sources of energy. Corn oil, rice bran, and other fat products boost the caloric density of a horse's ration. Overweight horses that need vitamins and minerals in a low-calorie package can be given a supplement that provides only these nutrients. Remember to feed no more than about five pounds of pellets or sweet feed at one time, breaking larger feedings into several small meals spaced throughout the day.

Beyond the basics. Water, hay, concentrated feed...a winter diet containing these elements is a good starting point. Good managers, however, ensure the comfort of the horses in their care by attending to a few more details.

- Horses should have access to shelter from extreme weather. This can be a barn, run-in shed, wind-break, or even a grove of trees. As with access to hay, low-status horses may be blocked from shelter by more aggressive animals, and alternative grouping may be necessary.
- Owners should be sure horses have proper dental care and periodic dewormings so that feed can be properly digested and utilized.
- Daily inspection of horses in winter months should include a light grooming, an all-over check for injuries, and an inspection for skin problems.
- Water consumption and manure consistency should be monitored (very dry manure is a sign that the horse may be becoming dehydrated).