

The Advantages of Turnout

“My horse stays nice and clean in his stall, and his coat looks great. He doesn’t get chewed up by other horses, I never have to walk out in the rain or snow to bring him in, and his shoes stay on most of the time. I could turn my horse out, but why should I?”

Many horses live indoors except for a few hours of exercise each week, and most have adapted well to this arrangement. However, it can’t be said that such a lifestyle is natural in any way. Most farm animals—cows, sheep, goats, pigs—are outside a great deal of the time. Horses are virtually the only large species commonly managed as indoor animals.

Most arguments for keeping a horse in his stall can be lined up in the “easier for the owner” column. Few, if any, fall into the “better for the horse” category. Let’s take a look at the advantages of turnout, as well as a few possible dangers and how to minimize them.

- **Musculoskeletal system.** It’s natural for horses to move as they graze and interact with their pasture mates. They can cover a surprising distance during a day of moving from one choice patch of grass to another, even without the occasional top-speed, watch-me-buck tour around the fence line. For young horses, research shows that free exercise contributes to the development of a strong skeleton. For older horses, the constant movement encouraged by turnout helps to prevent the stiffness and stocking up that are common when horses stand in their stalls for long periods.
- **Socialization and stress.** Horses are herd animals, and many horses find it hard to relax if they can’t be with, or at least see, one or more other horses. Some horses are reluctant to lie down in a stall; maybe they miss having a buddy to watch for predators, or possibly they feel the space is too cramped to get down and back up easily. Youngsters turned out in a group learn manners and social order from the older horses. The respect taught by senior horses will make the human trainer’s job easier because the young horse will already have learned that submission to authority is sometimes required.
- **Diet and digestive function.** A horse’s stomach produces gastric acid constantly. Saliva buffers this acid, but saliva is produced only when the horse is chewing and swallowing. After finishing their hay, stalled horses may spend hours before another flake is supplied, and unbuffered acid can quickly lead to the gastric ulcers that plague many barn dwellers. In contrast, grazing keeps a near-constant supply of roughage moving through the stomach, preventing ulceration and providing fiber that is essential to intestinal function.
- **Injuries and appearance.** Turned out singly, horses tend to get a few scratches and scrapes. Turned out with a buddy or two, they may suffer some kicks and bites. Most are not serious, but if it’s important to have your horse’s coat looking perfect, turning out may be a problem. Lots of exposure to the sun results in some bleaching and dulling of the horse’s coat, a consequence that

can be avoided by turning out only at night. Pastured horses will pick up everything from minor grass stains to impressive whole-body mud packs when they roll, so grooming may take quite a bit longer. On the other hand, shedding a heavy winter coat may go more quickly, as loose hair rubs off on fences, trees, and the ground.

- **Hooves and shoes.** Stalling is not a guarantee that your horse won't pull off a shoe, although it's true that thrown shoes are easier to find in a stall than in the field. Pastured horses will encounter some mud and wet grass; stalled horses spend part of each day standing in contact with urine and manure. As long as their feet are in reasonable condition and regular trimmings are scheduled, barefoot horses don't have major problems in the pasture except for the brief period of tenderness that is natural right after shoes are removed.
- **Weight.** For thin horses or those recovering from illness, fresh grass provides a steady supply of calories and is more appealing than dry hay. For overweight horses, free movement in the pasture tends to burn more energy than spending the same number of hours in a stall. Grazing muzzles are effective in allowing the horse to nibble constantly while actually consuming a relatively small amount of grass.
- **Behavior.** Stalled horses may be jumping with energy and excitement when they are taken out for their daily exercise. Pastured horses, having expended some energy in free movement, will often be quieter to ride or work. Trail horses will be more familiar with strange sights and sounds if they have spent time outside, and they are likely to be more balanced when negotiating uneven ground if they have encountered hills, slopes, and other natural terrain in the field. Finally, pastured horses are less likely to develop habits like weaving, pawing, kicking, and stall walking, behaviors thought to result from boredom and stress related to solitary confinement.
- **Respiratory system.** Recurrent airway obstruction (RAO), chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and heaves are terms used to describe the coughing and exercise intolerance seen in horses that are sensitive to the molds and spores present in barn dust. Keeping these horses out of the barn is the best way to relieve respiratory congestion, and is therefore an important step in managing this condition.

Providing as much turnout as possible can offer significant advantages over stall life. Horsemen's Yankee Pedlar quotes an equine veterinarian who said, "Almost 90% of the problems that I treat are related to a lack of exercise." Turnout, the most natural type of exercise, is probably the easiest way to enhance your horse's quality of life.

However, complete turnout with free grazing may not always be practical. For horses on restricted diets, dry lots and grazing muzzles are alternatives. If horses are low in the social order and are in danger of abuse from their herd mates, they might still enjoy the freedom of a small paddock that allows them to see other horses. For show animals whose coats must remain in unblemished condition, turnout at night and/or use of a protective sheet might be good options. White-muzzled horses that sunburn easily can wear sunblocking cream or a fly mask that protects the lower face.

Regardless of the management system used, it's worthwhile to cater to the horse's nature by making turnout part of his daily schedule.