

I keep my event horse at a boarding stable where horses are given one bucket of water in their stalls during the winter months and two buckets of water in the spring, summer and fall. I allow my horse (an 1100-lb Thoroughbred) time off during the winter, so how much should he be drinking a day? Is one five-gallon bucket sufficient?

Water consumption depends on various factors, though body weight, diet, temperature and physiologic state are most relevant. Most idle horses that weigh similarly to yours consume just over one-half gallon for every 100 pounds of bodyweight, or about 6 to 7 gallons each day.

Because it is winter, hay is likely the primary component of your horse's diet. Unlike lush pasture, which can contain high levels of moisture and may contribute significantly to daily water requirements, hay offers very little moisture. The more hay a horse eats, the more water he is likely to drink. As an example, in a study conducted at Kentucky Equine Research, horses fed all-forage diets ate 19 percent more dry matter to provide a similar caloric intake to those fed a mixed diet and, consequently, drank 26 percent more water.

Air temperature can affect water consumption. Horses will generally drink less water in cold weather than in mild weather. Hot and humid weather typically increases water consumption, even if horses are not being asked to work.

Moderate to heavy exercise can increase water intake substantially, due in part to sweat losses. It would not be unusual for the water intake of an exercised horse to be twice as much as that of an idle horse in comfortable weather (70° F). Consumption is likely to increase as temperatures rise, and it is common for some horses to drink nearly 20 gallons a day.

Though this does not pertain to your horse specifically, lactation can increase a mare's water intake well above that of a nonlactating mare of similar weight.

If I were to guess, I would say the season plays a role in the decision to remove the second bucket from your horse's stall. Because of reduced workload and colder temperatures, your horse's water intake may be substantially lower during his off-season.

If you live in an area where temperatures regularly fall below freezing, breaking and dumping ice from only one bucket requires less work for the individuals taking care of your horse. There is no harm in your horse having only one bucket as long as it is topped off frequently and your horse has water available to him when he chooses.

If you would like to submit a nutrition question, please contact Eileen Phethean at ephethean@ker.com or mail to: EQUESTRIAN Nutrition Questions, c/o Kentucky Equine Research, 3910 Delaney Ferry Road, Versailles, KY 40383.