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## Winterizing Your Horse

*By Heather Garcia, DVM*

As the days get shorter and the temperature drops, it's important to remember to winterize your horse. By addressing your horse's health care, nutrition, water, and shelter, you can assure your horse is healthy and happy throughout the winter months.



Make sure your horse is up to date on his/her vaccinations and deworming. We recommend that every horse be vaccinated against EEE, WEE, WNV, and Tetanus twice a year and against Influenza and Rhinopneumonitis at least once a year. Dewormers should be given every couple months on a rotational schedule. It's a good idea to do a fecal lab test at least once a year to assess the effectiveness of your deworming program.

It's a good idea to deworm with Ivermectin after the first frost to kill any harboring bots. External parasites such as lice can also be detrimental to the weak, young, and older horses, so dusting your horses and premises during this time can be beneficial.

Teeth are also important to check before winter, especially in older horses. Proper dental care can help to maintain weight as well as ward off choke and colic.

Horses that enter the winter months at an ideal body condition score (BCS) will be more capable of maintaining their weight and handling the colder weather. Thinner horses have a harder time maintaining their weight and often lack the adequate fat supplies with help to insulate them from the cold. Your horses BCS should be assessed weekly to make sure he/she is not losing or gaining too much weight. A horse with an adequate BCS should have ribs that you can feel but that are not easily seen.

Horses use more energy in the colder months to stay warm. Therefore, some horses, especially older horses, will require more feed (%10-15 more) in the winter months. It's generally safer to increase the hay/forage rather than the grain. If additional energy is required to help maintain your horse's weight, beet pulp or corn oil can be added.

It is also very important that you monitor your horse's water intake throughout the winter months. Although handy, automatic waters often make it harder to assess the amount of water your horse is drinking. Horses should have access to clean, ice-free water at all times. Water intake usually decreased in the winter, which can set the stage for impaction colics. Heated water sources can entice your horse to drink more.

However, make sure your water heater or bucket warmers are in proper working order since water and electricity do not mix. By providing access to a salt block or by adding one tablespoon of table salt once a day to your horses ration, you can entice your horse to drink more. Bran mashes are also a great way of getting more water into your horse.

Adequate shelter with good ventilation is an essential part of winterizing your horse. A horse's coat is its first defense from the cold. However, wet hair loses its ability to insulate, so having a place where your horse can get out of the weather is key. A damp horse is also prone to skin conditions. You can help ward off fungal infections throughout the winter with routine grooming. The same concept applies to blankets. If you feel that your horse requires a blanket, it is important that it fits properly, is water proof, is clean, and you can check on your horse daily. A damp dirty blanket offers no insulation to your horse and can also lead to skin infections.

It is also critical during the wet winter months to keep up with your horse's daily hoof care. To ward off thrush, horse's hooves should be picked out daily and their stalls should be clean and dry. Thrush should be treated early if it becomes a problem.

And finally, the fall and winter are also common times for laminitis (founder) due to the higher sugar contents in grasses as the grasses start to stockpile nutrients for the winter. It is important for Cushings horses, obese horses, or horses with known metabolic problems to be monitored for laminitis. These horses should also have restricted access to these high sugar grasses.