

Horses Need Extra Attention During Winter

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Horse owners should pay careful attention to their animals to make sure they stay healthy and comfortable during winter, according to an equine specialist in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"Healthy horses are tough creatures and can withstand cold temperatures, but there are many ways horse owners can make winter easier on their animals," said Pat Comerford, instructor in dairy and animal science.

When horses are kept in stables during the winter, ventilation and proper stable management and hygiene are critical.

"Stabled horses are more prone to contagious diseases such as strangles, influenza, and rhinopneumonitis," Comerford said. "Make sure that vaccinations are kept up-to-date and isolate sick horses if possible."

"People tend to shut the barn up tight to keep it warmer, but many barns don't have adequate ventilation," Comerford said. "When you go into the barn and smell a strong odor of ammonia, the air quality is poor. This increases the risk of serious respiratory ailments. Ventilating the barn will help reduce that risk."

If you keep your horse blanketed during the winter, be careful.

"Blankets and hoods help keep a show horse's coat in good condition, and obviously help with warmth," Comerford said. "But if the temperature rises during the day and the horse sweats, the blanket will get wet. If it's not dried before the temperature falls at night, a wet blanket can really chill the horse. It can make the animal colder than if it had been left unblanketed."

Making sure your horse has adequate feed and water will help the horse stay warm and in good condition.

"In winter, your horse's energy requirements rise, so feed intake should also increase," Comerford said.

"Feeding roughages like hay will generate body heat due to the digestive process," she said. "So make sure your horse has access to high quality hay, and supplement grain as necessary to add energy. Also make sure your horse gets enough water. If a horse's water intake is restricted, feed intake may decrease and digestive prob-

lems such as colic may occur."

Owners should check their horses regularly during winter to be sure they are in good condition.

"Long winter haircoats can easily mask excessive thinness and other problems," Comerford said. "Be sure to run your hands over the ribs at least weekly to make sure the horse has adequate fat cover."

If your horse is kept outside, make sure it has a good haircoat, shelter from the wind and a dry place to rest and eat.

"Once the haircoat gets wet and matted, it loses its insulating value, so a dry place must be provided during extended cold, wet conditions," she said.

Hoof and leg problems also can become more prevalent during winter.

"Thrush, a common hoof disease, often occurs during wet weather, particularly if the horse is standing in mud and manure," Comerford said. "The best way to prevent thrush is to keep the hoof dry and clean. If your horse is outside in mud during winter, be sure to clean the feet frequently and

watch for thrush symptoms. These include a foul foot odor, blackish discharge and, in serious cases, lameness."

Horses on snowy ground can develop ice balls under their hooves, particularly if they are shod.

"When this happens, the horses must walk on balls of ice, and it's very painful for them," Comerford said. "These ice balls can be so painful that the horse doesn't want to move, and may not even walk to get water or feed. You must knock the balls out with a hoof pick or hammer."

"If you don't ride a lot during the winter, pulling the shoes can help prevent ice balls, but even horses without shoes can get ice under their feet. If you keep the

horse shod, you can purchase special pads that will keep ice balls from developing."

Even if you ride often during winter, your horse may work well without shoes in many situations.

"Many horses can be ridden with shoes pulled during the winter, as long as they're not ridden in rocky areas," Comerford said.

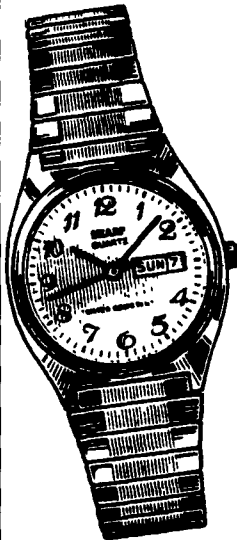
"But if you must ride on icy surfaces that can be slick or slippery, it's best to work with your farrier to get shoes that provide better traction. Different types of shoes will provide the best traction in different situations, so be sure to ask which type of shoe is best for your riding program." Routine hoof trimming and maintenance should continue on a regular basis to keep the hoof healthy.

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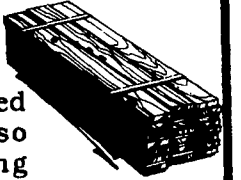
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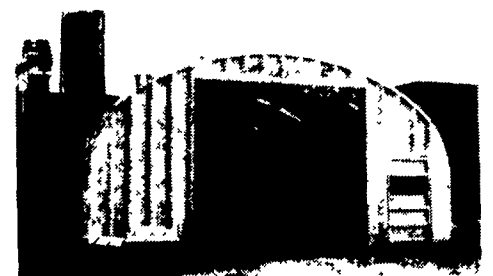
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