



# **Cold Weather Considerations For Your Horse**

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Review the following check list and discussion to see how well prepared your horse is for the winter.

## **1. Shelter**

Winter housing for horses in Central Oregon varies from practically nothing to heated barns with bedded stalls and blankets. I know of no real definition for what ethical or humane equine winter housing is. I do feel that as horse owners we are obligated to provide shelter from blustery winter wind and precipitation. Horses with good winter coats and adequate nutrition require no more than an open three-sided loafing shed with the open side facing away from prevailing winter winds. New arrivals to Central Oregon that have lived in southern climates may need to be blanketed for a few weeks. We frequently see these animals shivering for several days before they become acclimated to our cooler temperatures. Horses who are accustomed to being blanketed and have short hair coats will be more dependent on their blankets for warmth.

## **2. Water**

Horses require access to clean fresh water at all times. In a recent, large scale colic risk factor study, horses that were provided access to multiple pastures had fewer colic episodes when water was provided at multiple locations compared to one central watering area. Unheated water tanks that freeze can deny water long enough to precipitate a colic episode. When using water heaters in stock tanks make sure electrical cords are appropriately grounded. Last year we treated a near fatal electrocution equine patient that was shocked from stray voltage.

## **3. Body Condition**

Heavy winter coats can prevent you from recognizing whether a horse is underweight or overweight. To evaluate your horse's body condition, try running your hands along your horse's ribcage. I like to be able to identify ribs with firm pressure. If you can't, your horse may be overweight. If ribs are prominent the opposite may be true. Older horses (> 17 yrs) tend to develop a body conformation that allows ribs to appear more prominent. Another good way to evaluate a potential overweight horse is to assess the thickness and firmness of the nuchal ligament of the neck just beneath the mane. This area serves as a fat depot. Overweight horses develop a firm and thickened "cresty" neck. A "cresty" neck is also a warning sign for laminitis or founder. If the dense, long hair

coat an older horse has been growing for winter doesn't shed completely in the spring, there is a good chance the animal has developed a pituitary adenoma (Cushings disease). This condition can be managed with the help of your veterinarian.

#### 4. **Deworming**

Internal parasites are a never ending nemesis to the horse. Small strongyles can complete a life cycle from egg to adult within 8 weeks. That's why deworming is recommended every 2 months. Freezing temperatures do slow this life cycle and it is not uncommon to see owners deworm less or even stop administering continuous dewormer all together during the winter. Remember that we do see periodic warming trends during winter that can jump start the parasite life cycle. Arguments that modern dewormers are "toxins" or "poisons" are totally unfounded and should be ignored.

#### 5. **Vaccination**

Most vaccination programs are timed for spring and fall. Pregnant mares should receive rhinopneumonitis vaccination through the winter to prevent abortions at 3, 5, 7, and 9 months of gestation. Pregnant mares should also be immunized with a 4-way vaccine 1 month prior to foaling to establish protective antibodies in the mare's milk that will be available to the newborn foal.

#### 5. **Feed**

The most important feed source for the horse at all times of the year is hay. Choose the best quality hay that you can find. Basal caloric needs increase during winter months to provide additional body heat that is lost at cold temperatures. Grain and rice bran are good sources for calories and fat. Older horses with poor dentition may benefit from eating processed feeds (Equine Senior®) that are more easily digested. Vitamin, mineral, and salt needs remain the same during winter. Remember that Central Oregon is copper and selenium deficient. Because of the varying types and quality of food sources available to choose from, horse owners should review their nutrition program periodically with their veterinarian.

#### 7. **Feet**

Hoof growth is influenced by temperature and slows during winter months. Good farrier care still remains important. Flexible snow pads available from your farrier can help prevent snow from forming ice balls under your horse's feet.

#### 8. **Don't ignore your horse**

Winter can mean "time off" for both horse and rider. Prevent small problems from becoming big ones by observing gait, eating habits, demeanor, and body condition. Better yet, break up the monotony of winter weather and go for a ride!