

Fall Healthcare Tips

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As the weather turns chilly at night and your thoughts turn to winterizing your house, you should also remember to winterize your horse! Although the days often remain balmy this time of year, the night-time temperatures can be downright cold. Things on your equine to do list should include:

Pull out your tank and bucket heaters, and inspect their condition. If in doubt about any electrical aspect, toss it and get a new one. Electricity and water are a dicey combination, and it's best to error on the side of safety. Horses can be (and frequently are) electrocuted by this equipment. Usually it's not life-threatening, but can prevent adequate drinking and result in dehydration and colic if they receive electrical current every time they dip their noses in the trough.

Consider whether you will pull your horse's shoes or whether to have your farrier fit them with snow popper pads. Leaving their normal shoes on in snowy weather leads to packing of snow in the shoes and can be very treacherous, leading to slips and falls. Barefoot horses are normally fine in snow; snow popper pads decrease the area for snow to pack and usually prevent significant accumulations. Remember the first snow is often by Thanksgiving, so think a few weeks ahead of time to avoid an emergency call to your farrier.

Fall is a common time for colic due to abrupt weather swings and secondary deficiencies in water consumption. Keep a close eye on your horse during this time, and make sure he's getting adequate water. Consider adding a tablespoon of plain salt to his grain/vitamin rations once daily to encourage drinking.

Deworm with an ivermectin product after the first hard frost to kill any bots your horse may be harboring. Remember to stick to a good rotational deworming plan, and that it's best to check the efficacy of your deworming program with fecal parasite floatation tests periodically. Your veterinarian's office can provide this service, which will let you know the type of parasites your horse may be infested with, and in what numbers. This is valuable in customizing a deworming program to your specific circumstances.

Fall is also a common time for laminitis (founder) for two reasons. Firstly, horses affected by Cushing's Disease often have a worsening of their symptoms at this time of year, due to fluctuating hormone levels. Laminitis is a common sequela of uncontrolled Cushing's Disease. Another factor leading to laminitis in the fall is that grasses start to stockpile high amounts of sugar in preparation for the long winter ahead. Frosts can initiate this process. If your horse is obese, or

affected by Metabolic Syndrome, you should be cautious about their access to this high sugar grass.

Finally, a reminder to watch your horse's weight as the weather changes. Some, especially older, horses might need more caloric intake to make up for the calories they burn staying warm. We also see the opposite problem, in which kind hearted owners blanket their horses, throw them a generous heap of hay several times per day, and are unpleasantly surprised when they remove the blanket weeks later to find a horse resembling a blimp! The best defense is to evaluate your horse's weight at least weekly by running your hands over their ribcage and squeezing their crests. You should be able to feel the ribs readily, but not see them, and there should be minimal crustiness. If it's thick and firm, they're probably overweight.