

Equine Updates

Transylvania County, NC

Winter 2017



Contact Us

For further information about services contact:
Addison Bradley,
Transylvania County
Livestock Extension Agent
106 East Morgan Street
Brevard, NC 28712
(828) 884-3109
(828) 553-9858
acbradl2@ncsu.edu
transylvania.ces.ncsu.edu

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Wintering Your Horse

As we gear up for the arrival of Old Man Winter, we are reminded of the challenges that winter horse care brings. The cold, snow, ice, rain, wind and any combination thereof, complicates barn chores and limits our riding time. For these reasons, we typically do not spend as much time in our barns or with our horses during the winter months. However, by keeping a few simple things in mind we can ensure our horses are receiving adequate care this time of year.

Access to Water

With the cold weather brings the risk for frozen water buckets and troughs in our stalls and pastures. Free and continuous access to water is important to maintain healthy horses. Excessively cold water will decrease your horse's water consumption. Ideally, water should be maintained at about 40 degrees F. Heated waterers are commonly used to assure the water source is not too cold or frozen over. When a horse's water consumption decreases, feed intake also decreases, leaving less energy available to maintain body temperature and condition. Reduced water and feed intake also leave your horse at risk for a number of intestinal health issues, including dehydration and impaction colic.

Adequate Shelter

While horses will need some protection from the elements, it is not necessary to keep them in a closed barn throughout the winter. Horses have two natural defenses against the cold – a long winter coat and a layer of fat beneath the skin, providing an excellent source of insulation. Keep in mind that the insulating ability of a horse's hair coat is lost when a horse is wet or covered in mud, so it is important to provide a dry shelter and regular grooming for them in cold, wet weather.

Proper Nutrition

Provided forage quality remains consistent, horses' nutritional needs do not significantly change during the winter months. Older horses or horses with compromised health may have a more difficult time maintaining body condition in extremely cold weather. A horse should be fed according to its type, age, and use – letting body condition be your guide. Inactivity and overfeeding are probably a bigger concern this time of year, as they can lead to obesity and associated health problems in the spring.

Regular Hoof Care

The same amount of attention should be paid to your horse's hooves, whether you are riding regularly or not. This is often one aspect of horse care that is overlooked in the winter. Horses' hooves are still growing in the winter months and they are walking on frozen, uneven ground, so timely and appropriate farrier work is important. Also, remember to pick hooves regularly to remove dirt and debris.



Written by: Crystal Smith, Animal Science Extension Agent, Virginia Cooperative Extension Service

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Fireworks Considerations for Horses

With New Year's Eve fast approaching, the nightmare of dealing with fireworks and terrified pets and horses arises once again. As horses are prey animals, sudden loud noises will automatically trigger their fight or flight response.



Below are a few tips to minimize their fear:

- Keep your horse in an secure and strong enclosed area free from any protruding objects—a stable is ideal if you have access to one. Also, remain with your horse until well after midnight but keep yourself safe...a panicked horse is a dangerous one!
- If your horse is in his paddock, make sure the fencing is secure and all gates on your property are closed.
- Have some hay, feed or treats such as carrots and apples ready to distract your horse.
- Gently scratch and rub his wither area, which most horses find relaxing.
- Remain calm and relaxed around your horse...don't overly fuss as horses are sensitive to our moods and fear. If you're a fairly novice horse owner, ask a more experienced person for help.
- Play some soothing music to disguise the noise.
- Have another horse nearby for company, one you know doesn't worry too much about excessive noise.
- If your horse starts getting nervous, distract him by moving him around, but only if safe to do so...remember, your safety comes first! Back him up, turn him, anything to direct his focus on you.
- It's a good idea to invest in third party insurance in case your horse escapes and damages people or property.
- Purchase some ear plugs or cotton wool to use in your horse's ears and keep them in place using an ear bonnet, similar to those worn by showjumping horses. Accustom your horse to wearing them for a few weeks beforehand.
- Make sure your horse has some form of identification...if he's not microchipped, then wearing a halter that has a tag with your contact details attached.



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