

WINTERIZING TIME AGAIN

By Aja Johnson, RAHT

Well, I think it is safe to say that winter is on its way. Gone are the days of doing chores in a T-shirt. Now we bundle up and wait for those days to return. With the cold also come several considerations for your horses' health and wellbeing.

First and foremost is water. The risk of colic skyrockets as many horses decrease their water consumption in colder weather. It is vitally important that your horses have free access to water at all times during the winter months. Without water, digestion of roughage slows and the risk of impaction colic increases. Eating snow is not sufficient! During my AHT career I have seen many horses die during the winter months because they were not provided with a water source and were expected to eat snow.

It is important that you check your horses' water source regularly for ice and debris. Water heaters, both floating and sinking, are a great way to keep your troughs free of ice and take the chill off of the water. Keep in mind that the floating heaters tend to be an irresistible toy for your youngsters (and immature adults). Automatic waterers should be inspected at least daily and fitted with an appropriate heater. For those who keep their horses indoors during the winter, heated water buckets are available.

Next on the list is parasite control and vaccinations. Every region is slightly different in its recommendations and every horse's situation unique. Now is a great time to check your notes and make sure your horse is up to date on treatments and veterinary care. If you are unsure of what your horse needs, have your veterinarian tailor a vaccine and parasite prevention program that best fits your horse's lifestyle and intended use.

Now to our Fjords' favourite subject, FOOD! During cold snaps your horse may need extra forage as the eating and digestion process generates heat. Be careful though: it doesn't take much to make our darling little horses transform into chubby little hippos! For most Fjords a high quality roughage and access to salt is sufficient.



Around the Johnson household, all barn helpers are appreciated.

A great way to make sure your horse is getting a well-balanced diet is to have your hay analyzed. Then you will know whether or not your horse is getting enough protein, vitamins and minerals. In many cases a mineral supplement is needed to complete your ration. As always there are exceptions. Those horses with a heavier work load, the young, the old, pregnant horses, usually require additional supplementation in the form of commercial, concentrated rations.

Also, a thorough, hands-on examination of your horse is a great way to judge how your horse is doing during the winter. Those woolly mammoth coats can hide a heck of a lot! Have a good feel of the legs, checking for swelling, lumps, bumps and hidden wounds. Feel the rib cage, spine and hip bones for weight loss, or more likely weight gain. For those of you who blanket your horses, be sure to remove the blankets

regularly to check for rubbing, wounds and body condition.

Just because it's cold and snowy outside doesn't mean your horses are useless until spring. Now is a great time to brush up on ground work, as long as you have safe footing for both you and your horse. For those of you lucky enough to have a sleigh, make some winter memories (and take lots of pictures). There is something magical about sleigh bells and crunching snow. Many with access to indoor arenas and mild climates will continue their riding and training schedules through the winter months.

Something else to keep in mind is the extra time needed to properly cool out your horse. Those thick coats that give our Fjords so much protection in the cold are a detriment when they are working and sweating. It is important to take the time to cool and dry your horse thoroughly before turning him back out. A warm, damp horse in cool weather will chill quickly and can be at much greater risk for colds and muscle strains and soreness. A wool or fleece cooler will allow muscles to cool gradually and help to wick moisture away from the skin, speeding the drying process.

Owners who plan to work their horses regularly through the winter should consider shaving and blanketing their horses. Shaving helps to keep the horse from overheating during exercise and speeds the cooling out process. There are many different types of clips out there, some more extensive than others. If you think clipping is something your horse could benefit from and are not sure how or what to do, carry out some research or consult a professional. Most barns or instructors will have a resident 'clipper' or know someone who can clip your horse for you.

All these preparations thought through this fall will ensure you have a good winter with your horses! 🐾

ASK THE EXPERT

OUR EXPERT: Professor Laurie Lawrence, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Animal and Food Science, University of Kentucky.

QUESTION: With all the new blended horse feeds on the market today, is there a place for simple old-fashioned oats?

ANSWER: Although over the past ten years horse owners have moved away from straight oats as the preferred feed for horses, research shows that good old fashioned oats should not be put aside. One of the leading equine nutrition experts in the industry, Dr. Laurie Lawrence, in 2009, reviewed more than 260 published research documents covering the nutritional value of oats in the equine diet. Her study "Oats: The Horse-Healthy Grain" analyzes palatability, composition, digestibility, behaviour influence and safety of oats. In her research, Dr. Lawrence confirms that oats have been recognized as the preferred grain for horses for at least a century for the following reasons.

1. Oat starch is more easily digested in the equine small intestine than starch from other cereal grains;
2. Whole oats are consumed slower than pelleted concentrate or sweet-feed concentrate and thus would be expected to enhanced gastric acid buffering;
3. Oats are less likely to contain mycotoxins that threaten horse health; and
4. Oats are a highly palatable grain for horses.