

What to do for your horse now winter is here



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Introduction

Short days. Long nights. Cold, wet and windy weather. It can only mean one thing. A British winter.

For many horse owners, the winter months see a reduction in the quality time you can spend with your horse. And it can also present a number of challenges in both care and maintenance. From changes in diet to coping with a reduced working regime, and heightened seasonal dangers.

We have prepared this guide to help you overcome some of these challenges. It offers practical advice based on our own broad experience. We will cover a detailed look at nutritional issues, advice on rugs, a warning on sycamore seeds, mud fever, exercise, yard and paddock care and grooming.

If you become concerned about your horse's condition and diet over the winter, we have an expert equine nutrition team that can help answer many of your questions, or who can prepare a personalised diet plan for your horse. You can reach them on 01458 333 333.

If your horse develops a medical condition over the winter, a vet should always be your first port of call.

I hope you find this guide useful and that you have a great winter with your horse.

Lou Talintyre

Founder of The Pure Feed Company



Diet

Modifying your horse's energy over winter

The amount of extra energy required will depend on many factors such as breed, age, body condition, size, health status. But if a horse is going to lose condition then it's most likely to happen in the winter. Those at risk are generally older horses, young horses, thin horses, horses with poor teeth, horses with low body condition score and, of course, horses that have been clipped.

For most horses, for every degree Celsius that the temperature drops below freezing, an extra 1% of energy is required to maintain bodyweight. A good way to supplement a little extra energy for horses that need it, is either to slightly increase the amount of hard feed, or alternatively, to add in a high-fat feed such as linseed. Linseed is ideal as it's palatable, low starch and also provides quality protein which may be lacking in forage or pasture during the winter

As the temperature drops, many horses will require a little more energy. This is because they burn more energy to keep warm.

When to provide more forage

Even if your paddock looks as if there is plenty of grass on it, the quality of that grass is likely to be of little nutritional benefit to your horse. This is great if you have overweight horses or ponies, as it offers a perfect natural opportunity for ad-lib low calorie forage. But if your horse requires more calories to maintain its weight and condition, you will need to supplement their rations by giving extra hay or haylage in the field. If your horse is stabled and only getting hay, feeding it soaked or steamed is often a good idea to help reduce the risk of respiratory disease. The alternative is of course to feed haylage.



The problem with bran mashes

Many people still like the idea of giving a horse a warm bran mash once a week. However, it is generally not a good idea to suddenly introduce a moderately large feed of something the horse is not regularly eating on a daily basis. By changing the diet like this, there is a risk of upsetting the bacteria in the hindgut. If your horse is prone to colic or laminitis this is a strong reason to avoid bran mashes.

Having said that, there is no reason why you cannot treat your horse to their normal feed on a cold day or after hard work - whether it be a concentrate, chaff, high fibre cubes or balancer with the addition of some warm water.

Do horses require extra vitamins and minerals in winter?

Vitamin and mineral intake from pasture and forages may be borderline for many horses during winter. This is especially true for horses with chronic conditions such as Cushing's and equine asthma. Both these conditions result in low plasma vitamin C. Horses affected will benefit from supplementation, especially during the winter months. A good broad spectrum balancer in their diet will help.

Winter water

While horses may not visibly sweat as much in cold weather, they still lose water and electrolytes which need to be replaced. There is a belief that hot horses should not be allowed to drink cold water. Most horses do not suffer any ill effects from doing so – out hunting they often drink happily from cold streams.

However, one study conducted in America showed that horses react differently to water temperature between summer and winter. While in the summer ponies drank equal volumes of warm and cold water, in winter they appeared to drink more when the water was warm compared with when it was cold.

What does this mean in practical terms? It suggests that at competitions during the winter, while there is no harm in offering cold water straight out of the tap, horses may be more likely to drink if the water is slightly warmer — between 15-20°C is ideal. And if you have a horse or pony that is prone to impaction colic, then a heated water trough or bucket might be worth considering.



Exercise and grooming

Keep an exercise regime going over winter

Many of us turn our horses away over winter, but try to make sure that they get some exercise. You don't have to force it every day. There is a good chance that if you are not enjoying it, your horse won't either.

If you brave the rain, a waterproof wraparound sheet will help to keep you and your horse dry. If you really can't get out riding, turning your horse out daily will help them to stay active. Ensure they are sheltered in the worst of weather and, when possible, at night.

If your horse loses fitness due to sporadic exercise, it is a bad idea to overcompensate with long or tough sessions when you do get out. An out-of-shape horse will be vulnerable to injury if pushed too hard. Keeping the exercise light and building up the workload gradually as fitness improves is a sensible approach.

Why daily grooming is important

Despite best intentions, at times, it will be difficult to give your horse the full level of exercise it needs. Lack of daylight, grotty weather or perhaps a rotten cold during the winter will all get in the way of taking your horse out. When this happens, still aim to give your horse a daily groom. As well as the quality time with your horse this provides, it helps you to keep a close eye on their health and condition. Look out for loss of condition, illness, cracked hooves, a lost shoe or an injury. Frequent grooming will give you the best chance of spotting warnings signs early and taking effective action.



Encouraging feet growth over winter

Your horse's feet grow more slowly in winter than in the warmer months, so it is especially important to ensure your horse grows good quality horn in the winter. After all, this will be what your horse will be standing and exercising on come next season. A supplement or balancer that contains biotin and which supplies adequate amounts of micro minerals is a good starting point.

Illnesses to watch out for

Mitigating the risk of sycamore poisoning

Atypical myopathy can be a fatal disease in horses that breaks down the muscles of the heart, respiratory system and skeletal muscles. It is caused by ingestion of hypoclycin A which is present in sycamore seeds. It typically occurs in autumn and winter when horses stumble across sycamore seeds.

If you have sycamores bordering or in your fields, consider moving your horses off these paddocks. Or if you are unable to, fence off as large an area around the tree as is practical.

The risk or severity is related to the number of seeds ingested. Whilst the seeds do carry with the wind, the concentration will almost certainly be highest near the tree.



How to spot mud fever and try to avoid it

Mud fever (also known as greasy heels or cracked heels) is properly called pastern dermatitis. These names are used to describe a range of skin infections in horses. Prolonged exposure to damp conditions is one of the aggravating factors. This could occur by standing in, or riding through, mud; repeated failure to dry limbs after washing them; and excessive sweating under a rug. So horses can be particularly vulnerable in the winter.

Possible signs of mud fever on the limbs include matted hair; deep cracks in the skin; hair loss; swelling, heat and pain; a thick discharge from scabs that is yellow, green, creamy or white; and in severe cases depression, lethargy and loss of appetite.

There are many things you can consider to help avoid mud fever - a number of which relate to keeping your horses limbs dry and reducing exposure to mud.

So, for instance you can apply topical barrier creams to (already dry) legs before work or turning out, or alternatively waterproof leg wraps. Counterintuitively, avoid over washing or overly vigorous grooming.

There are actions you can take in the horse's environment too: ensure bedding is clean and dry, disinfect equipment and stables from time to time in case dermatophilus spores are lurking, and keep horses away from excessively muddy paddocks or gateways.

It is a good idea to keep a look out for the signs of mud fever. If you suspect your horse has a problem, talk to your vet.

Frosty or snowy ground and laminitis

Another issue to consider when there is a hard frost is the pasture when you turn your horse out. A hard frost will raise the sugar content of grass which will be a particular problem if your horse has laminitis. Restrict their access to frosty grass for a few days in these circumstances.



Environmental care

Don't overestimate the need for rugs

Many horses are rugged too heavily over winter and this reduces the amount of energy they need to use to keep warm. Therefore, this practice can be a component in obesity. Don't judge the need for a rug based on how you feel. The horse has a coat and is much larger than we are, and so retains heat much better than we do. Take the rugs off from time to time and body score your horse so you are keeping track of the changes that are taking place. No one wants to take a rug off and get a surprise by finding their horse or pony has either gained or lost weight.

Yard and paddock care

Icy conditions can bring a number of issues to your yard and paddock.

Consider the water first of all. It is important to prevent water in a trough or bucket from freezing over, or at least ensure it doesn't get left frozen over for long. This will prevent your horse from drinking and thus staying properly hydrated. This can bring on a range of health problems, for instance increasing the risk of impaction colic. If the area that you live in is particularly prone to sub-zero temperatures, consider investing in a trough heating device.

If your water pipes are likely to freeze then it is sensible to lag them to reduce the chance of this happening. You could also fill up one or two buckets of water in anticipation of a frozen start to the next day.

Looking at the stable, ensure it is cleaned regularly and well ventilated. Choosing a good quality hay and bedding which is dust free will reduce dust and help lessen the chances of colic and stable coughs.

Think about the condition of the ground in your yard and paddock and how you can manage it. Over the longer term you could prepare a schedule of maintenance and improvement: can you improve the drainage around your gateways to reduce mud? Could wood chippings be put down, and how often would they need to be replaced?

If you have more than one paddock, choose one for winter use. It will get poached but then you can let it rest over the warmer months so that it can recover for the next winter.





How to contact The Pure Feed Company

Helpline: 01458 333 333 (9:00 – 17.00 Monday to Friday)

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