

Horse Warmth in Winter

Nancy S. Loving, DVM, discusses how to make sure your horse is warm throughout the winter months.

10-03-2007

Q. In the winter, how do I know if my horse is warm enough? Is his winter coat sufficient for warmth or does he need a blanket too?

A. Horses respond to the shortened days leading up to winter by growing a winter coat. It is this hefty fur coat and the underlying fat that insulates a horse against inclement weather. Sheds and stalls provide additional protection from wind, rain and snow.

However, a thin horse or a hard keeper may need added protection from the elements. In today's age of hi-tech materials, there is a huge selection of blanket possibilities. So, when you drive down a country road, you will likely see horses sporting all colors and types of blankets in the chilly winter weather. How can you tell if your horse is comfortably warm and snug beneath his blanket, or if he is OK without one?

As a general rule, most healthy, unclipped horses don't need added blanket protection in temperatures above 10 – 20 degrees Fahrenheit. Below that, a blanket helps conserve calories and keep your horse comfortable. A wet horse often shivers as a natural response in order to warm the muscles. This does not necessarily mean a horse is chilled, but rather it's his body's way of coping with the environment. Offering extra grass hay will help him stay warm from the inside out by utilizing the natural combustion chamber of the hindgut as it digests the high fiber ration.

If your horse is blanketed, put your hand beneath the blanket to see if he feels dry and toasty warm. If so, then he is likely just fine. The danger comes from over-blanketing. Too much insulation, particularly on a warmish day with the sun shining, creates a possibility of overheating. If your horse feels slightly damp (sweaty) beneath his blanket, then the blanket needs to be removed. A fat horse or one with a dense and thick winter coat may do better if left without a blanket. Usually, a good plan is to remove a blanket during the day, especially when the sun is out, and then replace it in the evening when the temperature drops. If your horse doesn't wear a blanket, be sure to brush out his fur and remove mud and dirt so his hair will fluff up to retain heat.

--Nancy S. Loving, DVM

[Ask your questions on the HorseChannel.com Forums >>](#)

[See more Expert Q&As >>](#)

[Submit your Ask the Expert question >>](#)