

Blankets, Coolers & Horse Care

By *Thomas N. Tweeten, Ph.D.*

It is that time of the year when we look at our horses out in the snowy paddock or snow-covered pasture and possibly begin to feel guilty as we observe them from the warmth of our living room window. Fortunately, nature has done well to provide horses and other outdoor animals with natural coats and survival instincts to help them endure the harsh winter elements.

Many years ago I clearly remember calling my father one cold winter evening the first year we were caring for our own horses. He was a life-long livestock farmer from southeastern Minnesota. I asked him what we should do to ensure that our horses would not suffer from the cold. His advice was quite simple and direct:

1. Give them access to shelter so they can get out of the wind and protect themselves from snow or cold rain.
2. Provide them with plenty of hay.
3. Ensure they have access to clean, ice-free water.

In a recent article in a University of Minnesota Extension Newsletter (Volume 3, Issue 12, December 2007), Dr. Marcia Hathaway presented some useful information regarding winter care. She wrote that horses, with access to a shelter and dry bedding, typically can tolerate temperatures as low as 40 degrees below zero. However, horses are most comfortable at temperatures between 18 degrees F. if the horse has a winter coat and 59 degrees F. if the horse has a summer or wet coat.

I asked my dad about blankets. After a rather lengthy pause, he slowly explained that the horse's coat should not be compressed by the weight of a heavy blanket made from synthetic fiber. We both agreed that the thermal protection of these man-made materials does not compare to the protection provided by the natural down hair of the horse's coat.

On windy, snowy or cold and rainy days, I may use a light, tightly woven sheet, much like a windbreaker jacket, to reduce the effect from wind chill while allowing the coat to breathe. It will not be prone to compress the natural coat. A scrim sheet, lightweight and made of a strong, tightly woven fabric, will provide protection from the elements.

Here again, Dr. Hathaway reminded us to keep in mind that a horse's winter coat is an excellent insulator, but its insulating value is lost if it gets wet or compressed. It is important to keep the horse dry and sheltered from moisture. She states that blanketing is not beneficial when the temperature is comfortable for

your horse. However, horses that have been body clipped must be protected with blankets, especially if they are turned out or are in an unheated shelter or barn.

Many blankets and some sheets are made from fabric that will easily generate static electricity when pulled across the horse's coat in cold, dry weather. Care should be taken to minimize this problem with the use of grooming products that contain natural humectants or moisturizers and will not dry or build up on the horse's coat. EquiScentials Coat Enhancer is one of several natural, moisturizing grooming products commercially available that can be used to minimize the development of static charge. I like to light mist it to the coat, using a natural-fiber dandy brush to work it into the coat both before and after I work my horses. Products like this should be used sparingly so that the coat does not get too damp.

If blankets are being used, avoid using coat polishes that contain silicon polymers or oils. They tend to dry the coat and dramatically reduce the ability of the coat to wick moisture and sweat away from skin. In addition, blankets and protective sheets will slip more easily, leading to damage of the fabric and discomfort to the horse.

After a horse has been worked, it will be warm and often sweaty. I use a cooler to help keep the horse warm as it cools down. The natural wool fabric often used in coolers does an incredible job of wicking moisture away from the body and coat of the horse. Coolers should be allowed to dry out between uses.

I suggest using no fabric softeners when you wash your blankets, sheets or coolers. While these products will help the blankets, sheets and coolers feel softer, it is well known that fabric softeners contain ingredients that reduce the fabric's ability to wick water away from the body.



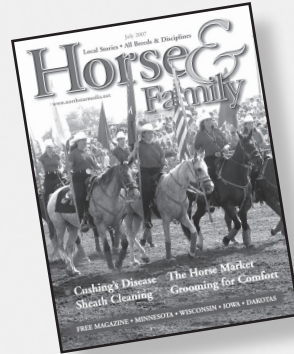
What were the basic ideas behind the second and third points my dad suggested to me for winter care of our outdoor horses? In terms of feeding, Dr. Hathaway states that a horse's energy needs for maintenance increase by 1.4 percent for each degree of temperature below 18 degrees F. This increased need for energy can best be met as forage (hay). For example, if the temperature is zero degrees F, a 1,000-pound, idle, adult horse would need an additional 4 pounds of high-quality forage each day. It is best to provide this hay on a free-choice basis so the horse can eat what it needs. Compared to the digestion and absorption of grains, much more heat is produced inside the horse through the digestive fermentation of forages. Most research suggests there is no additional need for increased nutrients during cold weather.

Like in the warmer months, Dad advised me that drinking water should be kept fresh, readily available and free of ice. The buckets or water tanks should be cleaned regularly. Here too, Dr. Hathaway states water should be kept between 45 and 65 degrees F. Some type of tank heater or heated water tank should be used to maximize water consumption.

Providing protection from the winter elements is an important part of horse care that will then contribute to the comfort of the horse. A horse that is comfortable will be more trusting and more easily collected when ridden or driven. 🐾

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