

FEEDING AND MANAGEMENT FOR WINTER

This is the time of year when many people are in transition between a largely outdoor regime for their horses to an indoor, stabled regime. It is usually much simpler to look after our horses in the summer when they are out at grass as this most closely mimics their natural environment as wild grazing animals. Shutting them in an enclosed 12' by 12' box with short bursts of exercise and high energy food can play havoc with their behaviour and metabolism.

The first thing to remember is that any change of management regime should be gradual, especially with regard to diet. Pay attention to the stabling; many horses are susceptible to dust and spores, developing debilitating lung allergies. The stable should be draught-free but well ventilated and airy. It is better to have too much ventilation; use extra rugs in cold weather. If you think your horse is prone to stable allergies then use a dust-free type bedding and avoid poor quality straw.

Remember that your horse is designed to live on roughage and you should aim to provide the majority of his dietary needs through hay or haylage. Concentrates are really the icing on the cake and you should strive to get the best hay that you can find. Again, if your horse has allergy problems then haylage should be your first choice. If you are going to feed wet hay then it needs to be soaked properly to be wet through, but not so long that all the soluble nutrients are leached away. It is a good idea to try to turn out your horse for some winter grazing each day. This also provides exercise and clean, fresh air.

There is no "one size fits all" rule for feeding concentrates: each horse is different with differing workload, behaviour and metabolism. Given that we are trying to provide the majority of nutrients from good quality roughage, one should then aim to feed the minimum concentrate food necessary to support the exercise demands of the horse. In addition the hard feeds should be divided and spread through the day as far as is possible, rather than in one massive meal. It follows that the exercise regime should be well planned and spread out so that your horse can cope with the peak demands put upon him.

Azoturia is a condition which causes muscle damage in exercising horses due to the rapid breakdown of energy stores within the tissues. Those horses that are prone to azoturia, or tying-up need careful dietary management as well as regular exercise to minimise the risk of an attack. In order to reduce the amount of carbohydrate stored in the muscle, feeding corn or any starchy food should be avoided. Instead, energy should be provided in the form of oil or fat. The amount of oil fed should be built up over a period of weeks, up to a maximum of 1ml/kg/day.

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