

Winter Precautions

Colic prevention, proper winter diet, and so on . . .

With the ongoing and never-ending winter we are experiencing, there are special precautions for our horses. At the risk of being repetitious, many of these are so important they need to be discussed. Treating patients with bellyache (colic) Christmas eve night brings to light precautions to prevent this discomfort to the horse and to the owner.

Most of the cases we have treated during this wintry weather can be divided between wounds and colics. The wounds reflect horses' remarkable ability to injure themselves. This natural ability to self-destruct, accompanied with the boredom of having nothing to do but stand together at the feeder, results in some remarkable injuries. Other than the normal precautions of providing the horses with a safe environment, there is not much we can do to change this behaviour.

There are several precautions that should help in preventing colics. These primarily have to do with the water and feed sources. Water, as we know, maintains hydration of the body. It also provides lubrication for the bowel. When the horse starts dehydrating, the amount of lubrication is also reduced. This slows movement of the contents, causing a backup within the bowel. As this backup continues, it becomes more compacted and more difficult to move. Gas and additional foodstuffs accumulate behind this area, increasing the discomfort to Dobbin. Soon he will be looking at his side trying to decide the source of the problem. He will then start laying down, stretching out, and possibly rolling to find a comfortable position. This is when we start walking to keep him standing until treatment can arrive.

The initial dehydration starts when water is unavailable or is so cold the horses do not want to drink. This reduced water intake leads to the reduced lubrication we mentioned above. Obviously, the way to prevent this is to provide plenty of ice-free water. This sounds easy until we are faced with several days of temperatures well below freezing. Adding a tablespoon of salt each day will help stimulate additional water intake.

Now that we are providing every bite of food the horses are eating, it is tempting to give them a little extra grain. If their condition is good, with an obvious fat cover over the rib cage, many of *our horses may not need additional grain*. What they will appreciate is more hay. Have you noticed how much more hay the horses eat when the temperatures and wind chills are at zero and below, compared to temperatures of 20+ degrees?

- The "*heat of digestion*" helps warm them from the inside.
- The heat generated from grain is intense but short-lived (remember this when you have another piece of fudge this afternoon).
- Due to its fiber and coarseness, hay takes longer to digest, and the resulting heat produced during its digestion lasts longer.
- In addition, the fiber in hay helps to maintain bowel activity.

Increasing the hay intake will give Dobbin more to do and keep him warm at the same time.

If your horses need more condition, the preferred approach is to *feed higher quality hay* for its additional calories and nutrients. If better quality hay is not available, then grain may be necessary to meet their calorie needs. Usually, the *price of grain will exceed the cost of better hay*, so the hay is a better choice in many ways. And by all means, collect the hay strings when feeding those bales!

These small precautions will help you sleep better at night. They will also prevent the discomfort of colic for the horse, and for you they will prevent the discomfort of long walks leading a resistant horse.