

Cold Weather colic advice



With a bitter cold night and hard frost, it is a good time to give you some tips. We always see a good number of colics 2-3 days after a cold spell and the cause for most of them will be due to an impaction. This is because when it is very cold, horses will often choose to drink less than usual and the gut has less water in it. Once the feed is in the large intestine (which absorbs water as its job), it takes what is needed just as usual and this leaves the feed material drier than it should be and it gets stuck. All the other feed backs up behind and once the intestine starts to stretch, the horse feels discomfort and pain and will show evidence of colic. This can be very mild through to severe depending on the individual horse's pain tolerance and how much stuff is stuck. Obviously this is made worse if the horse is kept in more than usual and allowed to eat unlimited hay. If the horse eats as much as it can of grass at 75% water and switches to eating hay at 15% water, you can see that the guts are taking in a lot less water. This is also why horses going onto box rest frequently get impactions so this advice applies to them as well.

There are a few simple things you can do to try and prevent impaction - the plan is simply to get more water into the horse.

1. Feed very wet feed. It should be quite soupy. Some horses will need to be trained how to drink/eat it.
2. Use very small holed hay/ haylage nets. This will slow down the speed at which the horse can eat and force them to chew the hay more. This provides a lot of lubrication to the hay and increases the moisture content of every mouthful swallowed. Horse salivary glands can produce an amazing 15 litres of saliva an hour. At max. capacity, if the horse eats 1kg of hay an hour it gets 15 litres of saliva per kg hay. If the horse eats 3kg of hay an hour it gets 5 litres of saliva per kg hay. Slowing them down is very effective in getting more water into the gut. It is also better for their teeth and reducing boredom and getting more of a trickle effect and less of a binge effect.
3. Wet the hay so they get more total water and it is wetter going down. It may be worth placing the hay in a bucket of water and letting the horse pick the hay out of the water if nets are not possible. They will often enjoy drinking the extra water as well as it will be quite sugary.
4. Warm the water in the bucket where this is possible as it is the cold that often puts them off. Some horses just don't like cold water, some have sensitive teeth, some have sore sinuses they have not told you about, some will delay going to a trough if the ground is bad around it or other horses are bullying them in a field situation and some are just "princesses" about cold water.

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5. If your horses rely on a trough outside, you will need to check it for ice an absolute minimum of twice daily as it can freeze back over very very quickly, and don't be tempted to give extra hay. If it is bitterly cold and dry, horses will keep warm very easily and don't need the extra, it will just bung them up.

6. In following some of this advice, don't be tempted to go out and buy a bag of cubes or hard feed they are not used to, or you will have colic associated with feed change, choke from gobbling the lovely new treat and impaction to finish it all off. Use your normal feed, just wet it a lot or if they are not usually fed start with a fibre based feed such as Hi Fi Lite soaked, grass pellets soaked, beet pulp soaked etc.

Hopefully these few tips will help you keep your horses well hydrated and out of Vet clinics. The aim is to get water in the gut, so anything you do that is safe for the horse and effective will help.

KEEP YOURSELF SAFE FROM ICE RELATED SLIP INJURIES dealing with all this water. Somebody has to keep looking after the horse and you can't if you have broken yourself.