

How to Care for Your Horse In the Winter: 11 Steps

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Caring for horses attentively through winter will help to ensure that they get through the season with relatively few problems. Horses are reasonably hardy in cold temperatures and grow a winter coat for additional warmth.^[1] All the same, care still needs to be taken to ensure that they cool down properly after being ridden, that they're not subjected to drafts, and that they're being fed properly through the winter months.

Steps

1

Focus on the horse's housing first. When preparing the [stable](#) or barn for winter, ensure that the horse's quarters are clean, warm, well ventilated, and free from drafts. Clean bedding is a priority and regular changes of the bedding should be prioritized. Remove anything that might injure or tempt the horse, such as low-hanging lights, nails sticking out, toxic cleaning substances, etc.

- If your horse is [wintering](#) outdoors in a temperate winter climate, be careful of rain. Wet cold is far less tolerable than dry cold, and you should consider blanketing your horse, as well as ensuring that there is access to some form of shelter such as a shed, to allow the horse to get out of the rain.
- Read [How to winterize a livestock barn](#) for more information on this topic.

2

Know how to care for a horse that is ridden during winter. [Riding in winter](#) brings up two issues – preparing the horse adequately for the ride, and cooling the hot horse down safely in the cold after the ride, and the following steps will deal with preparation, riding, and post-riding. Be aware that there is no temperature bar to [riding a horse](#),

provided your horse has adapted to the temperature (which requires regular outings) and it's not too cold for you.^[2] Fierce cold winds are not ideal for riding, nor are severe thunderstorms or blizzards, so use your common sense when judging the riding conditions. It is extremely important to take good care of your horse's hooves in the winter, because the mud can cause serious thrush, and well trimmed hooves have a better grip on icy surfaces than neglected hooves do!

- Aim for four to six hours weekly of riding during winter. This is especially important if you're a competition rider, as well as ensuring that young horses get used to the work required of them.^[3]
- Plan well ahead. Winter means longer driving times, longer preparation times, and shorter days. Be aware of the time constraints affecting your ability to ride your horse and care for him.

3

Prepare your horse for riding. Even before you get your horse ready for riding, check the terrain and pasture where you plan to ride your horse. Look for ice or deep mud hazards that could cause your horse to slip or trip and make plans to avoid those areas. Add de-icing agents such as salt or sawdust to slippery zones around the stable and tacking areas, gateways and doorways, etc. In terms of the horse:

- Warm the bit before you tack up. Run hot water over it, or use a non-toxic hand warmer gel. If you don't have access to either, remove the bit from the bridle and put it in your pocket close to your skin as you prepare everything else. You can also breathe on the bit to warm it.
- Another alternative is to use a sweet iron bit; this isn't as harsh and doesn't become as cold as normal steel.

Clean out your horse's hooves well. Add a layer of non-stick cooking spray or petroleum jelly to your horse's hooves; this will prevent balls of ice and snow from forming in the hooves.

Groom your horse. This is not only good for warming the horse's muscles, but serves as an excellent warm-up workout for you too.^[4]

Consider using an exercise sheet to prevent the horse's muscles from becoming cold while riding. This is especially important for a clipped or thin-skinned horse, or a horse that has been restricted to a stable. Use it while tacking up as well as riding.

4

Tack up. Find a clear, clean spot to tack up, where it is not muddy or icy and has good footing. The same requirements apply to the riding area itself.

5

During riding, take care about where you choose to ride. Pitfalls for riding during winter are varied depending on whether you're riding in snow or in more temperate muddy, cold temperatures. Things to watch out for include:

- Deep snow, especially where it conceals holes, tree wells, and crevices where your horse could slip down.
- Ice. Any ice is potentially dangerous as your horse has no grip or traction.
- Mud. While a little mud is fine, a lot of mud can cause the horse to become bogged, or to trip. Mud can also conceal objects that might harm your horse. Large areas of mud are best avoided.
- Wet slopes. Take care riding a horse down a wet slope, as it is easy to lose grip, especially when going fast, and moving over wet stony or rocky areas.
- Never canter or gallop your horse in snowy, muddy, icy, or slick terrain.

6

Post riding, cool down your horse properly. This is a time when the horse can get a chill, moving from being very hot and sweaty, to being cold. The following procedures form an important part of sensible post-riding care during winter:^[5]

- If his ears are hot, walk him around a bit. Feel his ears again. They should be cool, not cold nor hot. Cold ears mean a cold horse.

- Dry your horse. A wet horse should be dried after riding in winter; there can be snow, rain, and sweat combining to make for a very wet horse. Take a towel in each hand and rub the towels over his coat in circular motions. Roughing the hair up will help dry it faster. If your horse is used to a blow dryer, you might consider using this as well.
- Brush off snow. Any snow that has attached to your horse (especially his legs) should be brushed off. Try to do this outside to prevent taking it indoors where it can melt and become slippery.
- Clean the hooves out and apply another layer of non-stick cooking spray or petroleum jelly to the hooves.
- Brush or curry your horse once he is dry. This will separate the hairs and help to keep him warm, as body heat warms the air between the coat and skin.
- If adding a blanket, make sure it is a breathable blanket that allows water vapor to pass through.

7

Return your horse to his stables, barn, or field. Ensure that there is adequate food and water. Give him hay to eat, as eating roughage warms him quickly, releasing heat as it's digested.^[6]

- Be sure to check that the drinking water supplied is not frozen. Horses will drink more water if it is warmed, reducing their risk of colic brought on by dehydration.^[7]
- Bank your horse's bedding up against any doors that lead out to the pasture so drafts don't chill him.
- For horses in temperate winter zones, ensure that there is still access to shelter even when they're left outside, such as a lean-to shed or a grove of trees.

8

Be sure to give horses kept in stables or barns plenty of outdoor time during winter. This helps to keep them healthier because they breathe fresh air and can adjust to the temperature changes on a regular basis.^[8]

- Encourage lots of movement and exercise to keep warm; this is how horses keep warm in the wild.

9

Be careful with using blankets to keep your horse warm. Realize that when you touch a horse with your bare hands in winter, it will feel cold to you. On the other hand, the horse's coat and body heat will be doing a wonderful job of insulating the horse, keeping the warmth directed into the horse, and your bare hand cannot feel this. Dr Joyce Harman recommends that blankets only be used on horses with special needs, such as clipped horses, old horses, sick horses, thin horses, rescued horses, horses which seem cold by nature, and horses without shelter.^[9] Young, fit, sheltered horses probably don't need blanketing.

- If you do use a blanket, keep using it, as the horse adapts its temperature regulation to wearing a blanket.
- Keep in mind that your idea of cold is not your horse's idea of cold; don't add too heavy a blanket, or too many.
- Wet cold is worse than dry cold for horses. Blankets are important to prevent rain from making horses too cold.

10

Be aware of possible winter ills. Just like us, horses get sick during winter and it's important to know what to be on the lookout for, and how to manage the problems that human intervention can cause.

- Horses are susceptible to respiratory illnesses during winter. The ammonia build-up, mold, and dust inside barns and stables can bring on a variety of respiratory illnesses. Do your best to prevent this by ensuring adequate ventilation and giving your horse plenty of outdoor opportunities to breathe in fresh air. Clean out stalls regularly.
- Horses are also susceptible to skin conditions during winter, such as rain-rot, bed itch, ringworm, lice, and infected scratches. Keep the horse clean, groomed, and medicated appropriately. Be careful not to blanket a wet horse or to use blankets that do not breathe but cause moisture build-up. See your vet promptly for treatment of skin ailments.

11

Spend time with your horse during winter. Even when the weather is foul and bleak, be sure to sit with your horse in the shelter and talk to him, groom him, and just be with him. He'll appreciate your company and it keeps the two of you connected. It will also help you to look forward to the better winter riding days, and the warmer days to come.

- Keep a regular grooming time in place during winter, no matter what the weather.

- If you can't get to your horse as often as you'd like because of winter conditions on roads, etc., have someone else check in on your horse regularly to make sure he's fine.

Tips

- Use sawdust on mats, trailers, and entrance ways to prevent slippage in icy and snow conditions.
- For you: wear layers of clothing. Your inner layers should wick. You'll sweat too when mucking out the stables, riding, and working with your horse. And take water for you when riding; it's harder to feel dehydration coming on during winter but it's as real an issue as any other time of the year, so keep your fluid intake up.
- Trim any fetlock hair to prevent mud fever.
- Horses use up body fat to keep themselves warm, consider using a under -rug vest under his turnout rug if he's in the field. Feed your horse high fiber hard feed if your horse drops weight in the colder months.
- Tack should be dried in a warm, dry area out of direct sunlight. Be sure that it is not somewhere damp, or mildew can start to grow on the leather.
- Turn your horse out in turn out boots to keep his legs clean and dry.
- Make sure your horse has access to clean, fresh drinking water and forage all the time.
- If your horse is still hot when you hop off, and you have cooled them off as much as you can, consider buying a fleece cooler to put on them after the ride to keep them warm and help them cool down a bit (slowly, as cooling the muscles too quickly can cause problems)
- Feed horses extra hay and some grain to replace their usual pasture and help them keep themselves warm.
- If your horse becomes sweaty when being ridden, consider having him clipped.
- Peanut oil on the outside of the hooves keeps them sturdy and retain their moisture in the winter.

- Use a bit of baby oil in the horse's mane and tail. This helps to keep it looking cleaner and shinier.
- Don't wash your horse more than two times with warm water.

Warnings

- Some horses try to protect their owners and themselves by avoiding mud puddles and ice, be aware of this and be careful that they don't catch you off guard.
- Horses that are stabled for long periods are more likely to be frisky. Lunge them before you ride if they seem to be hyper.
- Greasing a horse's soles, helps, but doesn't totally prevent snow balling. Check the hooves regularly during the ride.
- Always wear the correct safety gear, including helmet and boots.
- Hard, frozen ground it puts more stress on the horse's legs. Avoid high-impact work.
- Horses have a hard time walking, trotting, cantering, and galloping through snow. Watch how you are riding so your horse doesn't become tired in 5 minutes.
- Be sure to check your tack before you start riding. You don't want to be riding in the far fields and find out that your stirrup leather is about to break!
- Do not feed a horse too much grain as they can colic from it.
- Be vigilant about barn, stable or shed safety. Don't overload electrical circuits using kettles, heaters, machinery, lighting, etc. and be sure there are no dangling cords that can be tripped over or chewed.
- Put down salt at the yard to prevent ice forming.

Things You'll Need

- Horse blanket (optional) - breathable, with nylon layer for waterproofing if needed
- Heated drinking trough
- Heating

- Fresh straw for bedding
- Safety cupboard for anything toxic so that it cannot be accessed by horses
- Cooking spray or petroleum jelly
- Salt, sawdust, etc., for icy ground
- Hoof cleaning equipment
- Winter riding gear
- Horse grooming gear