CAVALOR®

FEED FOR THOUGHT

WINTER FEEDING STRATEGIES

As much of the United States is experiencing the full force of winter, it might be a great time to review your winter feeding strategies! The energy to grow a thick winter coat and maintain a healthy core temperature can only come from a proper diet.

As one may expect, as the temperature drops, the energy requirements of the horse goes up. A good rule of thumb is to increase forage by 1lb for every 10 degrees below freezing. It is a common misconception that concentrates help keep the horse warm. Instead, the fermentation in the large hindgut of the horse is a heat generating process and can only be fueled by the addition of more forage to the diet.

In general, it is best to head into the winter months with the horse at a higher body condition score than would be considered ideal, in the 5.5-6 range. It is much easier to be ahead of the game during autumn and have your horse lose excess weight during the winter than it is to add weight to a thin horse while concurrently battling precipitation and low temperatures. This is often best done with a combination of good quality forage and a calorically dense feed such as Cavalor® Strucomix Senior, which is great for putting additional condition on a horse.

Water is also critical during winter. Horses often become reluctant to consume adequate amounts of water when the temperature drops. Some of this is due to ice creating a physical barrier to water access and water temperature preferences of the horse. An easy fix for both these issues would be to use an electric water heater specifically intended for use with horses to keep the water temperature between 45°F and 60°F. Another easy way to sneak additional water into the horse would be a warm bucket of Cavalor® Mash & Mix, served 1 part water to 1 part mash. Cavalor® Mash & Mix is also designed to assist in gut motility, to help keep those pesky winter bouts of colic at bay. Some people choose to mash their horses twice a day in particularly inclement weather since this is when horses are even less likely to consume water.

A common practice is to also add electrolytes to a horse's diet to help encourage water consumption. This is actually one of the worst things you can do to a horse reluctant to drink. Electrolytes are designed to replace lost electrolytes in the case of exercise or travel to correct any electrolyte imbalances that may have occurred. When one gives electrolytes to an already dehydrated horse, one may actually be compounding the problem and inadvertently cause the horse to become even more dehydrated due to the large amount of salts present in their system without sufficient fluid. This can cause the horse to become even more dehydrated, lowering blood circulation and potentially increasing the chances of gastrointestinal upset. A plain salt block placed in a dry area is sufficient to meet the salt requirements of the horse during winter without the addition of electrolytes.

Depending on what part of the country you are in, it may make sense to adjust the diet to make of for seasonal dietary deficiencies that would naturally occur. For example, if your horse is normally on fresh grass, a source of B vitamins, vitamin E, and beta carotene (precursor to vitamin A) should be added to the diet during the winter months. Or, if you are in an area of the country that does not see a lot of sunshine during the winter, one should add a source of vitamin D to the diet. The goal is to try to keep the nutrient profile of your horse's diet as complete as possible despite environmental changes so that your horse comes out fresh and able to tackle the spring events with vigor.

Williams C. A. and Ralston S. "Winter Feeding for Horses." Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. February 2011. Marteniuk J. "Winter Energy Needs in Horses." Michigan State University, College of Veterinary Medicine.