

HOT WEATHER HORSE CARE

Summer is the most active season for horse owners. It's show season, it's trail-riding season, it's HORSE season. It's also the time of year when heat and humidity are a constant factor. Fortunately, most horses, when managed properly, easily adjust to the high heat and humidity of summer. Proper management is key because without it heat exhaustion and, even worse, heat stroke are very real possibilities. Here are a few simple management guidelines that will help you keep your horse happy and healthy in hot weather.

- **Water rules.** All horses should have free choice access to clean, fresh water. Water is the most important nutrient in a horse's diet. It composes a majority of the horse's body and accounts for several very important functions, including regulation of body temperature, transport of nutrients, waste removal, and digestion, absorption, and utilization of nutrients. Under normal circumstances, a horse will consume one gallon of water per 100 pounds of body weight. During hot, humid weather a horse will compensate for the additional, body fluids lost in sweat by increasing water intake. A temperature change from 55 degrees to 70 degrees will increase a horse's water requirements by 15 to 20 percent.
- **A place in the shade.** During extremely hot weather, simply being able to get out of the sun allows the horse to stay cooler.
- **Keep it moving.** Air movement is especially useful in keeping horses cool. Pastured horses have access to natural breezes and wind. Stalled horses do not and may need to have fans hung on their stall fronts (be sure the horses cannot reach the electrical cords supplying the fans).
- **Cleaner = Cooler.** Urine soaked bedding and manure ferment more rapidly in hot humid weather. Fermentation produces both heat and ammonia, which increase the risk for lung disease.
- **The fitter they are the better they'll fare.** A horse that is exercised regularly throughout the year and is physically fit, can deal with temperature extremes more easily.
- **Short lessons are best.** Shorten work periods and give your horse frequent walk breaks. The breaks will give the horse's body cooling mechanism a chance to catch up.
- **Think early or late.** If possible, schedule your workouts for early in the morning or late in the evening to take advantage of cooler temperatures.
- **Pay attention!** Carefully observe your horse for any signs of distress. Heat exhaustion symptoms include weakness, rapid breathing, and quivering muscles. The body temperature may be elevated to 105 – 108 degrees. During heat stroke the body temperature gets much higher (up to 115 degrees) and a horse may get a vacant staring expression in his eyes. The horse will stop sweating and rapidly develop a dry coat in which the hairs stand on end. This indicates a severe breakdown of the body's cooling mechanism and can quickly lead to the animal's death. If you notice any of these symptoms, first aid is essential. Immediately take steps to lower the horse's body temperature. Spray the horse with cool water, get him out of the sun, keep him moving slowly to increase air circulation over his body, and have someone phone your veterinarian immediately.

These seven basic guidelines will go a long way toward keeping your horse hale and hearty in the heat.

– SARAH GEE

References:

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