Ensure your horse stays healthy all season long by using common sense and avoiding these Top 10 winter horsekeeping mistakes:

**1. Letting his waterer freeze over.**  A horse will not stay properly hydrated if his water is frozen. Snow and ice are no substitute for clean, unfrozen drinking water. Your horse’s risk of impaction colic is greatly increased if he doesn’t have access to unfrozen water at all times. If you live in a region that experiences below-freezing temperatures, invest in a heating device specifically designed for horse waterers and troughs.

**2. Not increasing feed rations when temperatures dip.** Talk to your veterinarian about how much feed your horse should receive during the winter months. As the temperatures drop, your horse burns more calories to stay warm. For some horses, this means considerable weight loss. If your horse isn’t on a calorie-restricted diet, consider increasing his hay rations as it gets colder outside. Forage (hay) provides an excellent source of calories. Also, the process of digesting fiber (most hays are high in fiber) helps keep a horse warmer.

**3. No exercise.** Just like we humans, horses need exercise all year long, even when it’s cold outside! If possible, continue riding through the winter months. If severe conditions make winter riding impossible, turn your horse out daily in a large pasture or paddock daily; if it’s safe to do so, consider longeing him to keep him fit.

**4. Overriding an out of shape horse.** If you only ride when the weather is good, chances are you won’t be doing much saddling up if you live in a cold winter region. That’s ok if you do other things to keep your horse fit, but if he’s a stable potato most of the season, use caution: An out-of-shape horse is at a much greater risk of musculoskeletal injury if exercised hard. If your winter riding schedule is sporadic, based on weather conditions, stick to lighter workouts that won’t over task your horse. Gradually increase his exercise level as his fitness improves.

**5. Sequestering a horse indoors.** Horses will stay healthier and fitter if left outdoors for the winter, with a few caveats: All horses must have shelter from the elements. A three-sided shelter with a roof is a must. If you do bring your horse indoors, try to leave him out during the day and only bring him in at night. And don’t close your barn up! Instead, leave it open to ensure good airflow inside; a closed-up barn leads to poor air quality that can affect a horse’s respiratory health.

**6. Over blanketing.** When it’s snowing outside and you’re inside enjoying a warm dinner by the fire, it’s hard not to feel sorry for your horse. To ease the guilt, you may be tempted to rush out and pile yet another blanket on him. Stop yourself right there! Yes, a horse with a full or partial body clip does need blanketing during winter, regardless of whether he’s kept indoors or out. But a horse with his natural winter coat probably doesn’t need blanketing as long as he has shelter from the elements, is receiving proper nutrition and is in good health. Over blanketing a horse can cause him to overheat, which can lead to dehydration and a host of health problems. If you are concerned about your horse’s comfort during winter, talk to your veterinarian about it.

**7. Lack of hoof care.** Nothing irks a good farrier more than an owner who insists on foregoing hoof care during the winter months. Horses—barefoot or shod, ridden or not—need regular farrier care every six to eight weeks, maybe even more often, regardless of the season. Period, the end!

**8. No beauty treatment.** Even if you don’t ride during the winter, groom your horse regularly—daily if possible. Regular grooming and handling provides the opportunity to evaluate your horse and alerts you to problems such as illness, injury, weight loss, lost shoe, cracked hooves, et cetera. It’s up to us, as owners, to intervene as quickly as possible when something is wrong. Catching a problem early on helps put your horse back on the track to good health.

**9. Throwing him out to pasture and forgetting about him.**There’s an old cowboy adage out there, "no rest for the horseman.” Yes, the holidays are upon us, and yes it’s darn cold outside, but you still have to keep up on your daily horsekeeping chores. Even if your horses are in pasture, you still have lots of work to do! Watering, feeding, grooming, exercising—get busy.

**10. Neglecting your own health.** Most of us are responsible horse people who put equine health in front of our own. But remember, if you’re not healthy, you won’t be able to care for your horse. When tending to your horsekeeping tasks this winter, stay warm, stay safe and stay healthy because there’s someone counting on you every day.

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For many pleasure and competition horses, the winter months are the time to unwind and enjoy a well-earned break. However, turning horses out for winter is less common in the modern era, as many enthusiasts train at specialist facilities, which include all weather footing or an indoor arena.

Exercise is good for people and also good for horses, so winter activity adds to the health and wellbeing of all concerned. Owners who take a holistic approach to winter care, will reap rewards for their efforts by paying attention to general horse care and exercise, along with feeding and rugging.

Adequate pasture and/’or hay with special attention given to the individual feeding requirements for horses and will keep them well nourished, sound and healthy during the colder months. It is important to check the horse’s condition regularly, as rugs will hide weight loss that would normally triggers a call to action and change of diet.

Owners should not neglect regular hoof care, worming and vaccinations just because their horse is taking it easy. It is important to inspect the horse’s feet and keep hooves trimmed and well maintained to minimize the risk of excessive water damage, foot abscesses and other conditions such as seedy toe and thrush. Routine oiling and removing the horse to dry ground every day will keep the hooves water resilient, healthy and strong.

Falling temperatures place a greatly increased demand on the horse’s energy requirements and it is well accepted that a good rug is worth a bucket of feed a day! The right choice of rug is an important consideration, for the comfort of your horse and the benefit of your wallet.

Winter feeding needs special consideration and it is recommended to give horses access to grazing. With the slowed growth of pasture grasses, there will be reduced “green pick” unless paddocks are rotated rested. If such management is not possible, free access to clean pasture hay should be available as the horse’s digestive system relies on significant quantities of low nutrient roughage to meet the energy requirements.

Pasture and hay contain a much higher fibre content than grains and concentrates and this roughage is broken down in the horse’s gut by bacterial fermentation within the cecum and large intestine. This process produces a large amount of heat, which will help to keep the horse warm, from the inside.

It is important not to make a sudden change to a horse’s diet or to increase the grain or ration of concentrates thinking that this will keep him warm. Even though winter is not usually associated with increased risk of Laminitis (founder), increased grain places the horse at risk and in sever cases of Laminitis, the pressure in the hoof can causes the pedal bone to rotate and this affects the horse’s soundness and freedom of movement, which can compromise the horse’s action for the rest of it’s life. Laminitic horse can be prone to other foot problems such as “Seedy Toe” and separation of the hoof wall, which will be ongoing and troublesome – particularly in winter. Healthy hooves are a great example of “prevention is better than cure”!

The horse’s water intake will be reduced during winter months. Horses with free access to hay could be at risk of impaction colic if they do not drink enough and checking that the water source is clean and plentiful is a must. Many owners do not favour automatic waterers as it is impossible to note whether or not the horse has been drinking. For colic prone horses it is wise to disconnect automatically filling drinkers and place a large container which needs filling and can be monitored. Horses can be encouraged to drink more by adding a favourite flavour such as NRG Stockgain or Apple Cider Vinegar check for availability at your local Saddleworld Store.

Throughout the entire year the horse will constantly shed hair and grow a new coat to accommodate the changing seasons. The horse will lose the summer coat in early Spring and very qickly, the longer double layered winter coat comes through to insulate and waterproof the horse and help to maintain a comfortable body temperature – even without a rug.

Horses grow a long thick coat as nature’s protection against the elements, but on warmer days or during work a winter coat can lead to over heating. Winter riders are challenged to find the right management for colder weather. Horses in full winter coat are prone to excessive sweating and this risks the requirement to put a wet horse back into the paddock after work to stand and become cold. A wet rug will take a long time to dry in cold weather and the horse will be colder than if not rugged at all.

Horses with a full winter coat and kept in work will sweat freely and the rider will probably consider having the horse clipped to ensure that a long wet coat does not make the horse cold and uncomfortable. Expert horse clipping contractors are usually available to advise and do the job. A trace clip will take off selected areas of long hair where the horse sweats up during work. This clip leaves the natural coat where the horse most needs the warmth and protection that nature intended, but keeps the sweat prone areas dry and easy to maintain.

Prudent horse management over winter will include good quality waterproof rugs, with spares in the cupboard to ensure that horses are kept dry and warm – even when it rains for days on end. It is recommended to change rugs regularly and turn them inside out and let them air to clean and refresh the lining. Brushing or sponging the lining can help prevent skin irritations and give the opportunity to check for wear or broken fittings which can expose the horse to danger. A broken leg fitting will allow the rug to slip and cause fear or flight.

Rugging saves grooming time and helps to keep your horse/s clean and sleek. An unrugged winter coat is difficult to manage and horses seldom look their best, as cold horses have a “goose bump” reaction (just like us) and this makes their coat stand out so as to trap warm air and give a “air bubble” of warm insulation to cocoon their body. Sadly this is not the look that the horse-proud owner is aiming for, as no one wants to have their horse resembling a “woolly mammoth” in the name of keeping warm.

Clever consideration to the objectives of rugging, will ensure that the horse is protected from cold winds and winter rain, but not at risk of overheating, should the weather warm up. Modern synthetic rugs provide warmth with the convenience of light-weight materials and easy care fittings. Synthetics are a good optio for horses with adequate shelter to enable them to get out of the direct winter sun. On sunny winter days, synthetic rugs can lead to over heating and excessive sweating and synthetics do not breathe as well as natural fibres. The warm nylon fill and lining magnifies and traps the radiant heat against the horse and the warmth is accelerated by the long winter coat.

In such circumstances the horse will overheat and sweat, wetting the rug lining or under-rug and causing discomfort and eventually causin skin irritations, loss of mane and coat which can be hard to rectify. If the horse’s neck and mane become overheated, it is common the the hair root to become moist with a weakening of the hair follicle and hair loss. I can be difficult to encourage the hair to grow back and a permanently balding mane area can result from over-rugging or the wrong rug selection.

Many modern rugs are labeled with a warmth factor rating and it is good practice to “layer” just as humans do when dressing for changeable weather. If a decision must be made early in the morning when it is still cold, it is better to under-rug than over-rug. Hoses are better equipped to handle the cold than the heat and a light but waterproof rug that protects from biting winter winds, is the best way to keep your horse comfortable.

Winter riding and enjoying the delights of the season can add a wonderful dimension to the horse experience and planning riding and horse care around the reduced daylight hours, wet paddocks and days of rain will mean that you are prepared for everything that the season brings and you will make winter a time of progress and new adventures with minimal inconvenience to horses or people.

Be sure to call into your nearest Saddleworld Store and take a look at the wide range of Eurohunter rugs. There offer a wide range, ideal for all seasons and perfect for keeping out the wind and cold. Be sure to ask how each Eurohunter rug performs and make the perfect choice for your horse

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Horses tend to reduce their water intake as temperatures fall. This reduced water intake, combined with increased forage consumption can lead to a greater incidence of impaction and colic. Water should be maintained between 45 and 65°F and any ice crystals should be removed. Water should be checked twice daily and provided at all times, as horses will drink 8 to 12 gallons a day. Forcing a horse to consume moisture by eating snow is counterproductive. Six times as much snow must be eaten to provide an equal amount of water. Furthermore, calories are used to melt the snow that should be used for body warmth.

In most cases, an all-forage diet is a more desirable way to meet a horse’s elevated energy requirements. Forages contain a much higher fiber content than do grains. Fiber is utilized through bacterial fermentation within the cecum and large intestine. Much more heat is produced in bacterial fiber fermentation than in digestion and absorption of nutrients within the small intestine (cereal grains). This results in a greater amount of heat being produced through the utilization of forages than utilization of grain. Thus, a horse’s increased energy requirements are better met by providing horses all the forage a horse will consume without wastage *(Figure 1)*.

Although winter conditions will greatly increase some horse’s energy requirements, the duration of the cold, windy, wet conditions should be considered before alterations are made in the feeding program. The amount of a ration (grain) a horse is fed cannot suddenly be adjusted without increased risk of colic and laminitis (founder). Horses should be preconditioned by gradual increases in the amount of energy fed per day (*Figure 2a* and *2b*). Increases in hay are much more readily tolerated by horses. If the cold spell lasts only one to two days, alterations in grain may be unneeded. However, if the cold spell is over an extended period of time, adjustments may gradually be made.

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As the weather turns cold, many horses are ridden less and less. It is easy to become relaxed in daily horse care since they are used less. However, horses still require much care and attention throughout the winter. Often, even greater attention is needed since there are no green pastures to graze or ponds and creeks from which to drink.

**Effects on Energy Requirements**

Falling temperatures, wind, and wet conditions cause a tremendous demand on the horse’s body for heat production. How much body condition a horse loses depends on the severity and duration of the cold season and the amount of energy the horse receives from its feed. As with all warm-blooded animals, horses must maintain their body temperature to survive. The environmental temperature and the heat produced within the body determine the extent to which heat must be conserved. The body does little to regulate heat generation and heat loss when the environmental temperatures are within ranges of the animal’s comfort zone or the “thermal neutral zone.” As environmental temperatures fall below the minimal temperature of the comfort zone or “critical temperature,” heat production is increased by the body by speeding up chemical reactions that produce heat.

The critical temperature can be used to estimate changes in a horse’s nutritional requirement relative to falling temperatures, cold winds, and wet hair coats. Estimates for the lower critical temperature for horses are between 30 and 50°F depending on hair coat, body condition, wetness, and windchill. The critical temperature for cattle ranges from 18°F for dry weather and heavy hair coats to 59°F for animals with summer or wet hair coats. Estimates for the lower critical temperatures for horses are given in *Table I*.

For each decrease in coldness of 1 degree Fahrenheit below the critical temperature, there is an increase in digestible energy requirements of 1 percent for body temperature maintenance *(Table II)*. The best estimate of coldness is windchill temperature as this combines the effect of temperature and wind. For example a horse with a heavy winter hair coat has an estimated critical temperature of 30°F *(Table I)*. Thus, if the wind chill is 20°F, the horse would have an increased energy requirement of 10 percent or 2 Mcal/day, and should consume approximately 2 additional pounds of hay per day *(Table II)*. This 1,000 lb horse already should be consuming approximately 15 lb of hay per day, and now should consume 17 lb of hay to avoid any loss of body condition. Wet weather combined with wind greatly increases a horse’s energy needs *(Table III)*. A horse in 32°F weather, without shelter and subjected to rain and 10 to 15 mph wind, would need to consume an additional 10 to 14 Mcal/day or a total of at least 25 lb of feed. Some horses would be unable to consume this volume of feed in hay alone.

Alterationa to Feeding.

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| **Figures 2a and 2b. Round bales are one option for simplfied winter time forage feeding.** |

Preconditioning horses before the onset of cold temperatures helps to reduce the effect of cold weather on nutritional needs. Fat cover acts as an insulator and provides energy reserves during stress. It may be difficult for horses to increase body condition during extremely cold weather. Additionally, during long bouts of freezing temperatures, most horses will experience some loss of body condition, no matter how well they are fed.

**Water Requirements**

Horses tend to reduce their water intake as temperatures fall. This reduced water intake, combined with increased forage consumption can lead to a greater incidence of impaction and colic. Water should be maintained between 45 and 65°F and any ice crystals should be removed. Water should be checked twice daily and provided at all times, as horses will drink 8 to 12 gallons a day. Forcing a horse to consume moisture by eating snow is counterproductive. Six times as much snow must be eaten to provide an equal amount of water. Furthermore, calories are used to melt the snow that should be used for body warmth.

**Hair Coat**

A heavy winter hair coat is a horse’s first defense from the cold. When allowed to grow, a horse’s natural hair coat acts as a tremendous insulator and provides as much warmth as the best blankets. Horses that are to be maintained outside should be allowed to grow a long hair coat, plus the hair within the ears and around the fetlocks should not be clipped throughout the winter months. Cold weather causes the hair to stand up, trapping and retaining body heat. Once the hair coat becomes wet, the hair lies down and loses its insulating ability. A long, fuzzy hair coat can be deceiving of a horse’s true body condition. The most accurate assessment of body condition is done through feeling the condition over the horse’s ribs, plus visual inspection of overall condition.

**Shelter Requirements**

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| |  | | --- | |  | | **Figure 3. A shelter belt of trees can provide sufficient winter time shelter for most horses.** | |

Although stalling is unnecessary for all horses, some protection from the winter elements is desirable. Horses acclimate to winter conditions extremely well but need to be able to escape the bitter winds and moisture. A small, three-sided shed or timberline is sufficient shelter for pastured horses *(Figure 3)*. This will enable them to minimize the effects of strong winds and snow or ice. The net effects are that horses will require less feed, can more easily maintain body weight, and are less stressed. These effects make the cost of sheds and windbreaks more attractive by reducing feed bills and reducing stress-related sickness.

If a three-sided shed is used, the open side of the shed should be opposite the prevailing wind. Each mature horse should have at least 80 square feet. The back wall should be 9-feet high, and the opening needs to be 11- to 12-feet tall. A 4- to 6-foot overhang will help prevent rain and snow from blowing into the shed. Sheds should be located so they have adequate drainage. If horses are to be indoors throughout the winter, stalls must be cleaned daily and bedding kept dry. Good ventilation is crucial. Damp stalls, ammonia buildup, and poor ventilation all contribute to respiratory problems. Horse owners will have much less labor, and at times healthier horses, if they are turned out during the winter months.

Care should be taken when leaving younger, less experienced horses on winter pasture. Running an older horse as a “baby sitter” can help teach the youngsters how to find shelter, food, and water. Additionally, the “baby sitter” often has a calming effect on the young herd and reduces the chances of them running through fences and such.

**Hoof Care**

Hoof care must be kept on schedule throughout the winter. Many horse owners prefer to “pull” shoes throughout this period of minimal riding. Any horse to be maintained outdoors in winter should have its shoes removed. A horse with shod feet can become ice packed, increasing the chance for slipping on snow and ice. Hooves should be routinely trimmed every six to eight weeks to prevent cracks and breakage. However, care should be taken not to trim them too closely to prevent bruised, sore feet from the frozen ground. Laminitis (founder) can occur from trauma to the sole due to walking on rough, frozen ground. Occasionally, if hooves are not maintained throughout the winter and allowed to break off, it may be difficult to have the horse shod when spring comes.

Caring for horses over the winter months can be a difficult task with cold weather, frozen water, and strong winds. However, the better horses are maintained during the winter, the better condition they will be in once the weather warms and it is time to start riding again. No matter how difficult the weather, providing feed, water, and shelter for horses is critical.