

- SENIOR HORSES -

Winter Warmers: Keeping Senior Horses Healthy in the Cold

Winter presents unique challenges for senior horses. As temperatures drop, they often struggle to maintain body condition, stay warm, and move comfortably. Their ability to regulate body heat declines with age, and dental or digestive issues can make it harder for them to extract enough energy from their feed.

While younger horses may cope with colder weather with minimal dietary adjustments, older horses often need more tailored nutrition, careful management, and additional warmth to stay in top condition. Here's how to ensure your senior horse thrives through winter rather than just enduring it.

The Role of Nutrition in Winter Warmth

A horse's primary heat source is digestion. The fermentation of fibre in the hindgut generates heat, making high-fibre feeds essential for keeping senior horses warm. Unlike grain-based feeds that provide a quick burst of energy, fibre releases heat slowly and steadily, keeping horses comfortable over long periods.

For older horses who struggle to chew long-stem hay effectively, a fibre-based feed like Barastoc Senior can be soaked and will help to provide essential slow-release energy. This is particularly important for horses with dental issues, weight loss concerns, or difficulty maintaining muscle condition.

For those needing extra calories without excess starch, adding a conditioning fibre mash like Barastoc Fibre-Beet Mash can provide an additional energy source while remaining gentle on digestion. This combination of digestible fibre and controlled energy intake ensures senior horses maintain warmth without the risk of digestive upset or metabolic imbalances.

Feeding a soaked mash warm can give a senior horse's digestive system a gentle boost, helping them process nutrients more efficiently. Unlike cold or dry feed, which requires extra energy to warm up internally, a warm mash reduces the strain on digestion, allowing nutrients to be absorbed more easily. This is especially beneficial in winter when older horses need more support to maintain body temperature and condition. A warm meal can also stimulate appetite, promote gut motility, and provide essential hydration, ensuring their digestive system starts the day in the best possible way.

Balancing Warmth with the Right Rugging Approach

Rugging is an important consideration for senior horses, but it needs to be carefully managed. While an aging horse may benefit from additional warmth, over-rugging can lead to overheating and sweating, which may cause chills when temperatures fluctuate. A good rule of thumb is to monitor body condition regularly—a thick winter coat or heavy rug can mask weight loss, so running your hands over their ribs weekly can provide a clearer picture of their condition.

For horses prone to losing weight in winter, a well-fitted winter rug can help them conserve energy that would otherwise be spent maintaining body heat. On the other hand, overweight seniors may not require as much rugging but still benefit from windproof and waterproof coverage during cold, wet conditions.

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Hydration: The Overlooked Winter Essential

Many horse owners focus on feed and rugging, but water intake is just as critical during winter. Cold weather can cause horses to drink less, which may lead to dehydration and can increase the risk of impaction colic.

Providing lukewarm water rather than ice-cold trough water can encourage better hydration. Soaked mash feeds like Barastoc Senior, Barastoc Fibre-Beet Mash or Speedi-Beet can also help increase water intake, supporting digestion and overall health. Checking water sources regularly to ensure they aren't frozen or too cold can make a significant difference in maintaining hydration levels.

Keeping Senior Horses Moving in Winter

Older horses may become stiffer in cold weather, particularly those with arthritis or mobility issues. Reduced movement due to poor footing or colder temperatures can make them even more susceptible to discomfort.

Encouraging daily turnout where possible helps keep joints mobile and circulation healthy. If turnout isn't an option due to wet or frozen ground, hand-walking or light exercise can provide the same benefits without excessive strain.

Providing a warm, dry, and draft-free shelter where they can move freely is equally important. Wet, muddy paddocks or hard, frozen ground can increase the risk of slips, joint strain, or hoof discomfort, so monitoring conditions regularly ensures their comfort and safety.

Final Thoughts

By focusing on nutrition, hydration, warmth, and movement, senior horses can not only get through winter comfortably but actually thrive. Adjusting their feeding program, ensuring access to digestible fibre, providing the right level of rugging, and maintaining consistent movement will help them stay healthy and strong throughout the colder months.

For senior horses that need extra condition or struggle with chewing, pairing Barastoc Senior with Barastoc Fibre-Beet Mash is an effective way to balance weight, support digestion, and keep them warm from the inside out.

Remember to always consult your vet if you are ever worried about your senior horses' condition or health, and reach out to one of our Barastoc Nutritionist if you need support with a diet for their golden years.

