
VISIBLE SIGNS OF DEHYDRATION

We all think about dehydration in summer when the weather is hot and horses fluid and electrolytes through sweat. However, how often do we think about dehydration in winter? Dehydration occurs when the horse's water intake is less than the water lost through bodily functions. Water is not just lost as sweat, but as urine, in feces and even when breathing. In the winter when the weather is cold horses sometimes will not drink as much as they should and access to pasture is often limited. (Pasture grasses contain water and in winter are often wet from precipitation). Dehydration can be very serious as it can result in other secondary conditions such as compaction colic, kidney problems and normal cell function may become inhibited. This is why it is important in very cold weather to offer horses water that has been warmed above freezing and to keep track of overall water intake. This can be hard if you are using automatic waterers. While buckets/tubs that require manual filling seem like a lot of work, they truly are the only way to know how much your horse is drinking. Research has shown that horses kept in cool ambient temperatures with access to near freezing water drank 38-41% less than water heated to an average temperature of 19 degrees Celsius. Other ways to avoid winter dehydration include feeding grain in a soup by adding water to the grain, feeding soaked beet pulp, mashes etc all of which help increase your horse's water intake. Soaking hay so that it is eaten wet is a great way of getting water into your horse but may not be an option in very cold climates. One of the first signs of dehydration is a reduction of dry feed intake so if you notice your horse suddenly starts to leave, or be less interested in hay you might want to consider checking for dehydration. Other signs of dehydration in the horse are similar to those in the human; reduced physical activity, lethargy, impairment of physical activity, and reduced urine fluid resulting in darker stronger smelling urine. The classic test for dehydration is the skin pinch test. This is best performed by pinching a fold of the horse's skin over the horse's shoulder. When released the skin should spring back to its fattened position. At less than 5% dehydration physical symptoms may not be visible but at 6% you may notice a slight inelasticity in the skin so that it remains in a pinched position for longer than 1 second. Once 8% dehydration is reached there is definite skin inelasticity and capillary refill time is 2 to 3 seconds (if you push on the horse's gums with your finger, this is the time it takes for the color to return to the gum once you remove your finger), mucous membranes may feel dry, feces will be dry and urine will be reduced, so if you are lucky enough to muck your own stalls pay attention to the consistency of the feces and whether there seems to be less wet bedding than usual. If you believe your horse may be dehydrated call your as they may need to administer intravenous fluids. For example a 500 kg horse that is 8% dehydrated will require approximately 40 liters of fluid to rehydrate and if you are unsuccessful in getting your horse to drink what is needed other intervention will be required. Knowing what us normal for your horse is imperative so that you can catch something like dehydration before it becomes something more serious.

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