



Equine Winter Cool-Down Methods

The Educated Horseman: Management Series



Even when winter brings us temperatures in the teens or twenties and we're building fires, cooking a pot of gumbo and rethinking our riding plans for the winter, you shouldn't let the colder weather fool you into thinking you're stuck inside. Your riding and training goals for the winter can still be achieved as long as you provide appropriate cool-down and recovery time for your horses.

After any length of strenuous exercise, it is important to provide adequate time for your horse to cool down. Cooling down involves lowering your horse's heart rate, respiration rate and body temperature to a resting level before returning it to the stall or pasture.

Cooling your horse down correctly will affect how quickly it will recover. Proper circulation helps clear waste products associated with exercise and will decrease muscle soreness. On the other hand, inadequate cool downs can result in injury and decreased performance.

While cooling your horse down appropriately during the winter may increase the time you are exposed to the elements, it is an essential step in maintaining your horse's overall health and conditioning.

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References

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Pub. 3415 (online only) 4/15

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These steps can help you create your own cool-down procedure and prevent injury:

- Begin your cool-down routine by walking horse for a minimum of 10-15 minutes. Continue walking or exercising at a reduced rate until your horse's vitals return to a normal or resting rate.
- Loosen your girth without removing the saddle right away. This will allow the air to cool the horse's back more slowly, reducing the chance of your horse suffering from cramps.
- Remove your saddle. If your horse has a thick winter coat, use a curry comb or a towel to ruffle the hair coat, which aids in drying.
- Use a wool/fleece cooler to prevent your horse from becoming chilled while its coat is drying.
- While your horse's coat is drying (with a cooler on), provide grass hay. The digestion of the high fiber content in grass hay increases body temperature, reducing the chance your horse will become chilled while still wet.
- Provide access to water. Ensuring that water is not too cold to drink, and certainly not frozen, will increase the likelihood your horse will stay hydrated during cold weather.
- Once your horse's hair coat is dry, you can remove the wool/fleece cooler and let your horse out to pasture or place in its stall. If your horse is clipped, blanket it before turning it out.
- If you plan on blanketing your horse, it is extremely important to make sure the horse and the blanket are dry. Heavy winter blankets do a great job of keeping your dry horse warm, but those blankets also do not allow a wet horse to dry.