



Should You Blanket Your Horse?

The Educated Horseman: Management Series



Usual winter weather in other parts of the country and colder-than-usual temperatures here in Louisiana force horse owners to take extra management precautions to keep their horses warm.

Despite Louisiana's typically mild winter weather, there are times when temperatures drop into the single digit. That kind of weather change leaves horse owners asking the question; "Should I blanket my horse?" The answer to this question varies based upon a number of circumstances.

The primary considerations in horse blanketing are hair coat, body condition and environmental factors. Keep in mind that healthy horses have a number of natural defenses against cold weather, including a long hair coat, a layer of fat beneath the skin and the ability to generate body heat via digestive activity.

A full winter hair coat is the first line of defense against cold weather and serves as insulation by reducing the loss of body heat. Its insulating value is lost when the horse becomes wet or covered in mud. Therefore, it is important to provide shelter that helps horses stay dry during wet conditions.

Another way to keep horses warm is by feeding adequate amounts of forage (hay). Maintaining body heat in cold temperatures requires additional calories. The greatest amount of heat is produced when microbes in a horse's gut digest high fiber feeds. To maintain adequate body heat, the average horse needs an additional 2 pounds of forage per day for every 10 degree change below 40 degrees Fahrenheit. This function, along with the natural insulating ability of its winter hair coat, will allow your horse to sustain appropriate amounts of body heat to withstand winter temperature changes.

Blanketing your horse is another way to maintain adequate body heat. While blanketing horses that do not have a winter coat can be beneficial, blankets also can compress coat layers, which inhibit their insulating properties.



So how do you know if you should blanket your horse? Blanketing becomes necessary to reduce the effects of cold and inclement weather when horses are exposed to extreme cold (10 degrees Fahrenheit or lower) and:

- There is a chance the horse will become wet.
- The horse has a poor winter coat or has been clipped for showing.
- The horse is very young or very old.
- The horse has a body condition score of 3 or less or is in poor health.
- The horse is not acclimated to the cold.
- Shelter from the wind/elements is not available.

Generally speaking, horses across Louisiana manage changes in temperature during the winter without needing a blanket as long as adequate hay is provided. Blanketing is a personal decision, however. Whether you choose to blanket your horses or not during the winter, make sure to adjust your management routine to ensure your horses have what they need to stay warm and comfortable.

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References

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