

# TO BLANKET OR NOT TO BLANKET - THAT IS THE QUESTION!

By Ed Jordan - DVM

The cold weather is definitely here and I never stop marveling at how any animal can survive those long, super cold days and nights of the Montana winters. Most do survive, but not all of them.

Food is the key. When there is plenty of food, and the right kind of food, the animals are fine. You probably have seen elk and deer all gathered around the farmer's hay stack in the winter and think they have it good. Actually, that may be lethal as many species have to have twigs, leaves, certain grasses, etc. and haystacks fill them up but may not nourish them. So number one thing for winter feeding is to have plenty of good feed to produce the heat energy they will need to survive. The other requirement would be fresh water—and not frozen water. Horses get along pretty well on snow as they graze but it takes a lot of energy to warm up the snow and ice in their bodies so the food element needs to be increased as well. A horse that is eating lots of hay and very little water is more prone to impaction colic and is in danger of sudden, painful death.

But what about helping the horse with better shelter and blankets. Shelter first: I built a barn when I first moved to Pryor and enclosed it with enough stalls to house all 13 horses. So on the first really cold spell, I put them all in the stalls and shut the doors. There was no heat source but at least being out of the wind would be better—right? Wrong.

Come morning, they were all looking colder than ever and were very anxious to get out of the barn. A couple of them had spent the night eating the straw bedding I put in and I was just lucky that they didn't colic on all the dry feed. So I started to realize that horses were meant to be outside with some shelter possibilities. I watched each morning thereafter and when they got cold in the pasture or in the corrals, they just started to chase each other. I soon realized that it wasn't really a chase but more of a way to warm themselves up again—which they couldn't do in the barn.

I have one horse with digestive problems and I leave him out all the time in the barnyard where the feed is so he can feed day and night at will. He also has that barn to go into out of the rain, snow and wind and he NEVER does. He lets the rain drench him when just steps away is shelter. He does like to block the wind with the building but he still doesn't go inside. Snow is nothing to all of them.

So you are guessing that blanketing a horse is a “no” for me and you would be right. Blankets hold in the heat but they also start early loss of the winter coat if left on for a while. They get moist from weather or just horse sweat and should be rotated and cleaned—the more often the better. Blanketed horses often have an increased chance of fungal skin infections because of the added moisture and close skin connection with the blanket that is an ideal spot for fungus to grow. Blankets are a necessity when a sick or very thin horse cannot stay warm in the winter cold. That scenario is a different matter.

You can look at your horses after a snow and verify that they are okay when you see the white snow piling up on their backs. That definitely means that their hair coat is so thick that not enough of their body heat is escaping through it to even melt the snow. SO: room to romp and play the warm up game when needed and lots of good food to generate energy is all you need to do.

This is just one man's opinion so if you disagree or want to add to this, send me your comments so I can pass them along. Ed Jordan [mtpetvet@mac.com](mailto:mtpetvet@mac.com)