

Ask A Vet: Cold Weather Colic Causes

Sunday, December 18, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Last week, our 8-year-old mare had a bout of colic for the very first time. Fortunately, we were able to get her through it with hand-walking, a little bit of Banamine, and a couple days of stall rest with lots of water. We were wondering if the weather may be contributing to this, as she also seems to be drinking and eating less since winter arrived.

-Shiverin' in Shipshewana

Dear Shiverin',

What you have just described is a very common issue for horses this time of year, and water consumption is often the source of the problem. Many owners don't realize it, but horses need just as much, if not more, water during the winter months in order to maintain adequate hydration. This can be difficult to manage, as many horses will naturally drink less during the winter months, tanks freeze, feed decreases, and energy requirements sometimes increase. Decreased water consumption can manifest with serious consequences, which usually develop slowly over time. These include things like decreased feed intake resulting in weight loss and poor doing, even though adequate nutrition is available. Additionally, chronic dehydration can lead to increased "dryness" of the gut, which slows down digestion and makes it difficult for feed to move through the intestines. This can result in a very serious condition known as impaction colic, or severe constipation. Impaction colic requires veterinary care and, occasionally, surgical intervention, which can be taxing for both horse and owner.

The average adult horse should be consuming anywhere from 6-12 gallons of water per day. Automatic waterers or retention ponds can make water consumption very difficult to monitor. If you're worried that your pony isn't consuming enough from a tank or pond, hanging two 5-gallon buckets and hand watering, in addition to the normal water source, can help to better quantify the animal's water intake. Monitoring your horse's physical appearance is also a very good way to assess hydration. Signs of dehydration include sunken eyes, dullness, lethargy, dry gums or very thick saliva, hard/dry manure, etc. Another reliable test is called a skin tent, which involves pinching up a fold of your horse's skin. Once released, the skin should immediately snap back to its normal position. A delay in flattening of the skin can indicate dehydration.

If you are having trouble getting your horse to drink enough this winter, certain measures can be taken to encourage more drinking. Adding more water sources to increase water availability will often help. Additionally, raising the temperature of the water may help, especially for older horses, as some horse's teeth may be very sensitive to cold water. Providing free choice salt (block or loose) near feed and water can also increase water intake. As long as there is free choice water available, excess salt will not harm your horse. Finally, if you notice signs of colic or abdominal pain, your horse is producing less manure, manure is consistently dry, or if your animal seems off this winter, please contact your veterinarian to have the animal assessed, as dehydration can have serious consequences.

As always, thank you for your interest and stay warm!

-Dr. Kyle DeYoung