

Summer Survival Guide for Your Horse

Our horses don't have the luxury of escaping into air conditioning - unless you're lucky enough to have air-conditioned stables OR own ponies and can sneak them inside! So, here are some handy summer hints to keep your horse cool and healthy this season!

IN THE PADDOCKS

If your horse lives full time out in his paddock, ensure that he has an escape from the heat, preferably a well-ventilated shelter, or leafy, shade-providing trees. If he's stabled part-time, consider bringing him in to avoid the hottest parts of the day, and give him some relief from flies.

WATER SOURCES

Imperative to summer survival!

Particularly important if you have automatic troughs, which often leads to them not being checked regularly. Ensure that they are all working correctly and that your horse has cool, clean water at all times. Keep troughs clean and re-fill them as often as necessary. Horses can drink up to fifty litres of water a day - so be sure you supply enough! Troughs are best placed out of direct sunlight, as the water will increase in temperature when it is warm.

CHECKING HYDRATION

Check for dehydration by pinching a small amount of skin, holding for a second, and releasing. A well-hydrated horse's skin will bounce back quickly. If it's a little slow, or if the skin holds the pinched shape, your horse is likely dehydrated.

HEAT AND COMPETITIONS

If you are planning to compete on a hot day this summer, try to leave early and travel in the coolest parts of the day. This will help avoid heat stress on your horse. Allow plenty of time before your events to make sure your horse is well hydrated. Some horses don't enjoy drinking 'foreign' water - so bringing some from home is a great idea, particularly when it's hot.

HEAT STRESS

Deadly for both horse and rider, so take care of yourself and your horse when the mercury rises! If you suspect your horse is suffering from heat stress, call your vet immediately. Common signs include weakness and lack of coordination, elevated respiration rate, elevated pulse, distress, colic-like symptoms and dehydration.

If your horse is suffering from heat stress, you can offer cool water regularly (offer small amounts frequently) and ensure that you keep your horse out of the sun and out of the heat. Anything you can do to help to reduce excess heat from the horse - including hosing the horse (especially his head and between his back legs as well as his whole body) or utilising fans in the stable - can help to relieve heatstroke symptoms. Foals may also be more susceptible to heat stress, as they are less able to thermo-regulate efficiently.

PESKY INSECTS!

If you've ever ridden in the absolute sizzling heat, you know just how annoying flies can be. But what about your horse? Have you ever thought about how annoying flies are to him? If you think flies annoy you - it's one hundred times worse for him! Luckily, horses do have some natural defences - their tails and forelocks. That's why it's important to resist the 'chop' and leave them a natural length in the summer months. If you're not going to show, leave them grow!

The horse's forelock helps to keep flies out of the eyes - and flies love to gather around moist areas. The horse's tail is his flyswat. Horses who have flies annoying them will often stamp their legs and swish their tails in an effort to discourage flies from buzzing around their legs. Cutting your horse's tail off too short will mean that his flyswat doesn't reach as far, and it'll be less effective.

Invest in a good quality fly-repellant for horses and apply it daily, being careful not to spray directly onto the horse's face. Always apply repellent to your hand first, and then gently apply to your horse's face. Spraying repellent around your horses stable or paddock shelter may also help to keep the pests under control. Fly veils are a must for horses in this weather, so make sure your horse is correctly fitted and snug at all times. Around the stable, eco-friendly fly strips (you know, the ugly looking yellow sticky things) can also help to control the population of flies infesting the stable.

Flies are attracted to many things - manure, moist areas, cuts and wounds... and they're not just annoying - they spread disease and can cause skin conditions on your horse. They can infect wounds, lay eggs on your horse's coat, and some even bite!

You can help to keep your horse fly free by making sure his eyes are clean, applying fly repellent, giving him a fly veil, or sheet, and by keeping your paddocks and stable clean.

Remove manure from paddocks and keep it well away from common areas and your horse's paddock - a manure heap is mighty attractive to flies!

Mosquitos are another concern - not only are they annoying but can also harbour disease, including viruses that can cause severe illness and can even prove fatal to our equine friends. The best cure is prevention - eliminate all stagnant water sources

from the property. This may include old buckets, tyres, anything laying around that could potentially collect water that would be an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes.

The eco-friendly mozzie repellent? A native plant commonly known as 'Mozzie Blocker' (*Leptospermum liversidgei*).

Dust, dirt and mud attract flies. Flies love all things dirty and may also annoy your horse if he is particularly sweaty, dirty or dusty. Keeping your horse clean during the summer months will also help his natural fly resistance. A quick hose off after a ride will help to remove the dried sweat and dead skin from your horse's coat.

Rugs and all over body protection help prevent irritation from flies. There are a few great fly sheets that are now available that may greatly reduce your horse's fly irritation. Some models include underbelly wraps and all over coverage. Look for a fly sheet that is light, breathable, and that fits well. Before you turn your horse out in anything this summer, check that it fits snugly (not too tight!) and that there is nothing that he could catch himself, his halter, fly veil or rug on in the paddock.

If your horse must wear a halter in the paddock, make sure it is one that will break in an emergency.

Summer rugs can assist in keeping your horse cool too - particularly for horses with dark coats. A light coloured summer rug will reflect the sun's rays and one that is breathable and allows air circulation between the rug and the horse's coat can help to keep him cooler.

HOSE OFF

If your horse is particularly sweaty after your ride, you can give him a hose off to remove the dried sweat from his coat - just don't let the horse 'drip dry' in the sun. The water on his coat will heat up, so make sure you use a sweat scraper to rid his coat of excess water and let him dry in a shady spot out of direct sunlight.

SUNSCREEN

Very important for you and your horse! Horses with white face markings (and even socks) can suffer terribly from sunburn in the warmer weather. You can buy sunscreen specifically made for horses, or use zinc. Human sunscreen isn't likely to last very long on your horse and won't be adequate for proper sun protection. Some sunscreens are available that include anti-bacterial properties and these can assist in the healing of existing burn as well as preventing further damage to the horse's skin.

INDOOR LIVING

Bringing your horse out of the paddock and stabling him during the warmest part of the day might be an option. If you have stables or yards that will offer relief from the sun's heat, then it makes sense to protect your horse from the harshest heat. HOWEVER... Your stable must be well ventilated. Air circulation is imperative to keeping an area cool, and also assists in limiting the amount of ammonia and fumes that may be in the air.

COOLING OFF PERIOD

After a ride, your horse will need to be cooled thoroughly. A hose down can do the trick, but allow the horse as much time as required to cool down completely before you put him back in the paddock or stable.

TRAVEL TIME

Be careful when transporting horses in hot weather. Ensure you bring enough water (and preferably a method to keep it at a cool temperature), and ensure that your horse has completely cooled down before loading him onto a float. As with your stable, good air circulation is important in the float to prevent it turning into a sauna!

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

- **Check your horse's water trough every day, and clean it out if it's dirty.**
- **Keep in mind that your horse (just like us!) is not able to sweat and cool himself as effectively when the weather is hot and humid.**
- **Keep an eye on your horse's hooves through summer. They can easily become dry and cracked.**
- **Keep a salt lick or mineral block in the paddock so your horse can have some anytime he likes. Your horse may also benefit from added electrolytes or nutritional supplements in his diet. Ask your vet or preferred feed supplier for advice.**
- **If there's not enough shade in your paddock, you may have to look at putting up a shelter. Horses need somewhere to stand in the shade.**
- **Make sure your fly veil is correctly fitted if you plan on turning fly out your horse with it on. Flyveils should be checked twice daily if one is left on, and it's important to remove it if it's raining.**
- **If you are leaving a fly veil and halter on, remove it often and give your pony a good scratch around the ears. Check that the halter isn't pinching or rubbing the skin. If this is happening, check that the halter is correctly fitted. If it is, you can try a halter 'fluffy' (a soft sheepskin halter cover), which will help to stop any chafing.**

Worming is still very important in summer, and it's important to have a good manure disposal system. The less manure in your paddock, the fewer worms and flies you'll have. Keeping things clean around the paddock will keep the fly numbers down, too! Summer is a great time to wage war on worms, as larvae and eggs dry out and die quickly in the heat.