

Minimizing Colic In Horses During Cold Weather Through Strategic Water Maintenance, Salt Block & Horse Feed Selections & More.

By Dr. Amy M. Gill

Most people caring for horses dread the first signs of winter— cold, blustery, wet winter weather makes keeping fresh, unfrozen water available to horses difficult and challenging. Water availability and intake are vital during the winter months, and horses eating dry hay need more water than horses grazing on fresh pasture. If horses can't access water and drink freely, the risk of colic increases dramatically. Here are some management tips for keeping horses well hydrated, even in the most inclement weather:

- **Install heater waterers or tank heaters.** If you are keeping horses outside, it is almost impossible to keep a water source open and free of ice without automatic heated waterers or a tank heater. Most tank heaters are inexpensive and can be installed quickly. If necessary, a thick extension cord can be run from the house or barn to get electricity to the tank. Also, be sure the water faucet does not freeze. You may need to wrap heat tape around the exposed part of the faucet to keep it from freezing up.
- **Keep the tanks full and clean.** Horses will not drink as much if the water is full of debris that fouls the taste.
- Make sure timid horses have access to water too. If there are more than five horses in the field, install a second tank or waterer. Many bossy horses will stand by and hoard water, preventing others from drinking.
- **Do not dump the tank where the horses stand to drink.** This can create a sheet of ice that is treacherous and may cause falls!
- **Provide plenty of free choice salt.** Salt increases thirst and helps keep horses drinking.
- **Feed hay near the water.** Make sure horses don't have to far to walk for a drink. If there is a lot of snow and ice on the ground, make it as easy as possible to access water.
- **Hot mashes are not a substitute for water.** Feeding hot mashes will not increase water intake very much, so even though horses may enjoy them, feeding a mash or adding hot water to feed does little to meet water requirements during frigid weather. Soaked beet pulp does not qualify as a good source of water for a horse!

Stabled horses must have plenty of water as well. Most barns don't have automatic waterers so extra buckets (at least two, five-gallon buckets) should be hung in each stall. It is also very important that this water be thrown out and the buckets refilled often, preferably a couple times per day with tepid water, so that fresh water is always available. This will encourage horses to drink.

As for pond-watered horses, it is best not to count on the pond for providing good quality, accessible water in the winter, so be sure to provide an alternative water source.

Frozen water is a horse's worst enemy in winter. Impaction colic occurs more often during this season than any other time. Make sure your horse has clean, unfrozen water to drink at all times!