

Frostbite

Frostbite is it a concern for horses?

As we all know Wisconsin winters are cold and last way too long. We have all gotten cold toes, fingers, and ears, so should we worry about our horses?

Not really...frostbite in healthy horses is extremely rare and if it does occur, it is most likely to be only the very tips of the ears.

Why don't their feet and legs get frostbite?

Mother nature has them well prepared for outdoor weather. Horses have evolved in cool temperature regions (unlike hominids that originated in the tropics). Horses are actually most comfortable at temperatures between 20°- 40°F. This is the neutral zone where horses do not have to expend any energy to keep itself warm or cold!

The healthy horse's needs for withstanding a Wisconsin winter are actually quite simple: water, food, and appropriate shelter from the wind. When there is blowing snow and it is -10°F, most horses stand out in the pasture like nothing could be better—even those that could walk in the barn often don't!

Horses have developed a circulation system that conserves body heat, yet keeps their ex-

tremities from freezing.

Most horses are more likely to develop winter related problems when people try too hard to protect them.

Dusty, moldy, damp barns that are too airtight are far more threatening to a horse's health. Damp metal buildings may, in fact, make your horse more cold due to the condensation and moisture inside.

Heated barns are not recommended either. As temperatures increase, so does the humidity, ammonia and other air contaminants. Microscopic water droplets in the air of a heated barn are the easiest means for bacteria, molds, and viruses to travel from horse to horse. This puts them at a greater risk for respiratory infections. Also, if horses spend an extended amount of time in a warm barn, the turnout time outside is a real shock to their system.

The type of weather that is actually hard on horses is when it is just above freezing and it is raining. If a horse does not have shelter

from the rain, they will get chilled from their wet hair coat.

Snow does the opposite and actually lays on top of the horse's hair — acting as an insulating layer. It isn't until the snow melts (when you put them in the barn) that it could penetrate the thick hair layer and make them cold.

Of course special thought should be given to the very young (foals), the very old, sick

horses, and those without an appropriate winter hair coat.

Foals by Mother Nature's

design are supposed to be born in Spring or Summer. Humans are the ones who have attempted to alter the timeline, trying to have foals born in January or February. Foals do not have the fat stores or hair development to keep warm like a healthy adult.

Older or ill horses may not have adequate fat stores or hair thickness or could be suffering from conditions that cause the shunting of blood away from the extremities, therefore making them more susceptible to frostbite.

Also, make sure to evaluate horses that are brought into Wisconsin from southern parts of the country and have not developed a hair coat suitable for our environment.

Other things to consider in Wisconsin include not clipping the hair around your horse's ears in the wintertime, since it is the most vulnerable area to frostbite. The hair serves as insulation from the cold.

Blanketing your horse in the winter is generally not needed either, except when we don't want them to grow a winter hair coat or if they have come from the south. Blanketing a horse can even be detrimental. If they are too warm under the blanket, they will sweat under the blanket, and the wet, sweaty hair then makes them chilled!

