

Does Your Horse Need a Winter Blanket?



As the days grow shorter and colder, you might be wondering whether your horse needs a blanket. There are different philosophies on whether to blanket or not, but there are some good reasons why you might consider using a winter horse blanket.

Horses are able to maintain their body temperature by growing a longer coat, which occurs as the number of daylight hours get shorter. This longer hair fluffs up, which provides warmth and insulation against cold temperatures, much like a down comforter. However, that insulation is lost when the coat gets wet from rain or snow or matted with mud.

Horses who have difficulty keeping weight on, are older or have health issues, have thin winter coats, don't have adequate shelter or those who have been clipped are those who will receive the most benefits from blanketing. But most horses who are ridden throughout the winter, live outside at least part of the time or are kept in a stall can also enjoy the advantages of blanketing. Not only will blankets help keep your horse warm and dry, they will keep him cleaner and reduce the number of calories needed to maintain a proper weight, which translates to savings on the cost of hay, feed and supplements.

There are several types of blankets commonly used during the winter:

Turnout blankets

A turnout blanket will help protect your horse from harsh weather conditions such as cold, rain, wind and snow, keeping him warm and dry. There are various levels of protection and warmth available in turnout blankets, and you should consider your horse's living and grazing conditions, the outdoor temperature, your clipping routine, weight, age and exercise level before purchasing a turnout blanket.

Turnout blankets come in a variety of warmths-or weights. Light blankets (sometimes called sheets) generally have little to no polyfill. Light blankets are appropriate for turnout on rainy days in more mild climates. Medium weights generally have 200+ grams of polyfill and provide warmth in temperatures down to about the freezing mark. Blankets that have 300 grams of polyfill or more are considered heavyweight and will protect in the coldest of climates and harshest conditions.

Blankets, such as those made by WeatherBeeta, are constructed from a durable outer fabric that resists tears fused with a waterproof and breathable membrane. This allows your horse to stay comfortable even if temperatures warm up a bit during the day. WeatherBeeta turnouts have no seam along the horse's back and all the seams are taped to prevent water from penetrating.

Turnout blankets come with a variety of neck styles to meet your horse's needs. A standard neck blanket only covers the horse's body. A detachable neck cover, such as the one found on WeatherBeeta Detach-a-Neck blankets, offers options depending on the weather. Put on the neck cover for full protection when the temperature gets cold and snowy or your horse has a full body clip. Or take it off when the weather is a bit warmer to create a standard neck style blanket. Combo necks offer full protection against the elements but are part of the blanket and cannot be removed. High necks offer more protection than standard necks but not as much as neck covers.

Stable blankets

Stable blankets are generally made from a non-waterproof, quilted material that provides warmth. Horses who are clipped and living indoors will benefit from a stable blanket because they are unable to move around freely to generate their own body heat during colder months. Lighter weight stable blankets can also be used to help keep horses clean.

Because stable blankets are not waterproof, they should not be used on a horse who is turned out. A light turnout blanket can be used on top of a stable blanket to provide waterproof protection, however. Stable blankets come in a variety of weights. For example, WeatherBeeta stable blankets come in both a medium weight with 220 grams of polyfill and a heavy with 300 grams to provide a variety of options based on climate and coat length. Some stable blankets, like the WeatherBeeta Smooth Quilt, even have an adjustable belly flap that provides extra warmth in the horse's girth area.

Coolers

Whether or not your horse wears a winter blanket, you might find a cooler useful if you ride in cold weather. Generally made from wool or fleece, coolers are used after exercise to help regulate your horse's body temperature and prevent it from dropping too rapidly while he is cooling down. It also prevents a sweaty horse from catching a chill while his hair is wet and matted down.

Coolers also can be used as an extra layer under turnout or stable blankets. Because they are not waterproof, they should not be used for turnout or left on in a stall for long periods of time.

WeatherBeeta products are now available in your local Tractor Supply store, and available online.