

HORSE HEALTH

This horse health resource sheet is produced by the Western College of Veterinary Medicine's Equine Health Research Fund (EHRF).

With grassroots support from Western Canada's horse industry, the EHRF conducts vital horse health research, trains graduate students in specialized areas of horse health, provides a summer research program for veterinary students, and promotes awareness of horse health care and management among western Canadian horseowners.

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Cold Weather Horse Care

Shirley and Jack Brodsky have bred and raised registered Paints on their 160-acre farm near Saskatoon, Sask., for nearly 20 years. That experience “in the field” has taught Shirley some valuable lessons about raising and caring for a large herd of multi-aged horses throughout the changing seasons. In the spring of 2009, Shirley took time out of her busy schedule to answer some questions about caring for older horses and about her feeding routines when temperatures drop. To read the article about Shirley's 25-year-old broodmare Double Value (Val) and geriatric horse care, visit the Summer 2009 issue of *Horse Health Lines*.

What's your winter feeding regime for your horse herd?

With all of my horses, I try to follow what would be natural for them as closely as possible. I try to make sure the broodmares don't get terribly fat: I don't like to over-supplement them. They're on unlimited hay all winter, and they run on an 80-acre pasture where they have shelter from the wind. They get salt, water, a supplement block every two weeks, and I sometimes feed them a little grain (whole oats) — but not all of the time. That's about it. It's not very fancy.

How do you water your horses?

They have access to a heated water bowl all winter, and I feed them far from their water source so they have to come in to drink. That keeps the whole group active, and I think it's good for digestion and social order. They definitely have a set pattern, and it's the older mares that will decide when they go for water. They'll bring in the whole herd for water and after they get their fill, they'll linger for awhile. But if it's windy, they'll head back to the trees for shelter.

What kind of shelter does your herd have during stormy winter weather?

I build a lot of wind shelters with large round straw bales. If the horses can get out of the wind and have lots to eat, they seem to do well — even during storms. I never blanket my horses: I don't want to affect their winter hair coats. But if a horse's hair coat isn't thick enough for the weather, I might have to consider it.

How do you prepare your horses for the winter?

One thing I've learned from watching my herd is that all of the horses really want to load up on food in the fall. I think they're instinctively trying to prepare for the winter by laying down a layer of fat before it gets too cold. I really try to ensure that the horses have all they can eat in the fall, because I hate to see older horses go into the winter on the thin side — they're always behind and trying to catch up on their weight gain.

Once the pastures start to burn off or if it's dry, I'll start hauling in hay. Depending on the weather, I may start feeding hay to the herd as early as August. For the first few bales, the horses eat as if they'll never be fed again — but then they calm down when they realize that I'll be bringing more. Again, I like to make the feeding transition easy so there are no health issues. The fall is often when colic cases occur because once the temperature drops, owners dump out large quantities of hay and their horses eat too much — leading to impaction.

Cold Weather Horse Care *(continued)*

What kind of hay do you feed to your horses?

I feed them a mix of alfalfa, brome grass and a larger percentage of crested wheat. The hay is in large round bales that I unroll on the ground instead of putting them in round feeders. By doing that, I find that we don't get as many respiratory problems plus we don't get one or two dominant horses guarding the whole bale from others in the herd. The hay also tends to mix with the snow and take on some additional moisture. Plus, it allows the horses to eat more naturally — closer to how they regularly graze.

The quantity really depends on the type of winter we're having. The growing horses — the coming yearlings and two years olds — will eat as much as the pregnant mares. If it's a long, cold winter, the herd will eat three times as much as they do during a mild winter. I always think of it being like stoking a furnace — you just keep throwing it in there.

We try to give the horses the best quality hay that we can. Our hay is custom cut on our land, so our quality depends on the haying season from year to year. Sometimes, the weather doesn't allow us to cut it when it's ready and we end up with less than optimum hay. If the hay is marginal, I tend to supplement it with more grain.

But truthfully, I think the horses do better on just plain old grass hay that may be more coarse. If they eat second-cut alfalfa — the rich, "dessert" type of hay — it just seems to go through them without producing much energy.

The winter of 2008 was long and hard on some horses.

What did you do to keep your herd healthy?

Toward the end of last winter, I started hauling oats out to the horses. I could tell that the older mares were feeling it because the cold went on so long. When we get in that situation, I do like to supplement them with grain plus beet pulp and some canola or corn oil — those are my favourite basic things. I soak the oats with beet pulp, oil and hot water: that just seems to give them a head start on digestion.

Do you only supplement the older horses' diet?

Everybody that runs together gets the same feed — young and old. When they have so much hair in the winter, it's often hard to tell whether they're losing weight, but I usually gauge it by the weather and their body score. After a few years, you get a sense of your animals' condition and that's the joy of having them around so long: you know when they're doing well and you know when they're not.

How long do you feed hay to your horses in the spring?

It depends. For instance, since this spring's (Spring 2009)

pasture wasn't very good because of all the cold, they were getting hay as well. I give them free-choice hay until the pastures were good enough and they left the hay. That way, we never seem to get any serious health issues when horses move from eating hay to fresh grass. We've had a little bit of colic but not very much considering the number of horses that we've had over the years. It's worked so far.

What about horses that do too well on feed: do you ever run into problems with horses carrying too much weight?

Not with the older mares, but I do have a few youngsters that are getting heavy. One mare in particular gets too heavy on spring grass, so I need to watch her weight.

If we are feeding grain to the herd, I feed them in a large circle instead of distributing the grain in a straight line or in corners. In this large of a herd, the dominant mare will push one and the whole circle will just continue to rotate. That helps to regulate how much feed each horse gets to eat.

Do you still learn something new about your horses every year?

Oh, for sure. I've taken care of a herd for nearly 20 years, but I still feel pretty new at taking care of horses. I've worked closely with Dr. Sue Ashburner at the WCVM, and she got a lot of information for me from Dr. Frank Bristol — one of the WCVM's retired professors who conducted equine behaviour research with large PMU (pregnant mares' urine) herds. I also have different friends in the business who have been really good at answering my questions.

The one thing I learned is that you can't be pigheaded about dealing with horses — you have to be flexible and you have to think like a horse. Every year, we get groups of veterinary students and veterinary technology students coming out here to learn more about horse handling and safety. I always tell them, "Drive out of town and just find yourself a big group of horses. Because you can learn so much just by watching a group of horses living together."

Horses are herd animals that still operate on some really basic principles, and the problems start when we deviate away from that too much. I think we need to remind ourselves that we're probably best to go back to what's natural for them. **H**

Visit www.ebrf.usask.ca for more horse health information and to read issues of *Horse Health Lines* — the news publication for the WCVM's Equine Health Research Fund.