

# BLANKETING HORSES - WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

by Dr. Wendy Coren, Chiropractor

Blankets are a necessary evil in the equine industry. They protect clipped horses from the cold, increase blood flow for the stalled horses, provide warmth for inadequate coats, and keep our equines clean(er). Many equine practitioners would rather see their patients growing a natural coat, as a response to seasonal changes. But, lack of space and show schedules make that impractical. Horse owners and trainers are going to blanket. Unfortunately, we see the consequences of well meaning attempts to take care of their equine charges.

There are consequences to blanketing that go beyond the sweating that occurs when winter weight rugs are left on during the warmth of the day, and the cooling of that sweat when the temperature drops. There are consequences beyond getting tangled in the straps and injuring any number of body parts. And, there are consequences beyond the obvious ill-fitting too small and too large blanket. Rubs are often the least of the problems. Correct blanketing involves putting the correct weight and size cover on. The horse must be able to move to eat, stretch, lie down and get up.

Often we walk into barns and find the horses in two or three layers with such restriction that they are literally straight-jacketed. This results in shoulder and neck problems that reoccur and progress. Constriction of the hind end results in sacroiliac issues that can affect the stifles as well. The latter occurs when the blankets are too small.

In our experience more is not better; proper is the only way to go.

Recently we have been utilizing the *Stay-Put Blanket* by Iron Horse Blankets. Philosophically this new style blanket makes sense, and ergonomically, it allows more motion in both the fore and hind end while providing the warmth the stall-bound horses need. The fact that we can fully flex extend the front legs with this blanket on means that normal motion, walk, trot and canter are possible without compensating for blanket wear. It is the compensations for wearing blankets that often leads to biomechanical issues.

Compensations are the way a horse, or any species, reacts to stress in an appropriate way to stay upright and



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functional. When alignment is disturbed the non-compensated animal can not function, it will 'go lame'. Equine enthusiasts are familiar with the term left front, right hind because it is so common for these compensations to take place. If there is a front limb issue the horse will increase weight bearing on the opposite back limb to stay balanced.

So....if the blanket is constricting the front end, binding the chest, restricting forward extension of the front legs, inhibiting shoulder rotation, and if this is a day in, day out situation then there will be adaptations to movement with and without the blanket. Often the first issues will be evident in shortened stride length in the front, difficulty moving long and lean due to lower neck stress, and turning problems. After a while there will be a translation of stress to the hind end and

new troubles present.

Proper blanket fit involves more than measuring the length of the horse from chest to tail.

Breed differences, fitness of the animal, withers and weight are just some of the factors that must be considered. And even then, they shift, slide and buckles break. The vest fitting blankets move with, not against, the horse's motion. Often, sursingles are used to stabilize and reduce slippage. The downside is rubbing, and if they are tight enough to stop slippage they can irritate the skin.

Our first sign that the blanket may be the cause of a horse's discomfort comes from three fairly obvious signs: loss of hair on or behind the withers and in front of the shoulders; equal or significantly one-sided tenderness on palpation (light touch) of the point of the shoulder; tenderness on the sternum (breast bone) often on one side. The most pathognomonic or clearly diagnostic sign is when the horse lays its ears back and avoids the blanket. It's the same as a rider resisting a show jacket that they can't fit their arms into. It's uncomfortable, it restricts movement, it hurts and they would rather NOT! If a blanket is a must, choose motion-enabling coverings such as the *StayPut Blanket*, making sure to select the correct size and weather appropriate covering. And remember, check the blanket and your horse often.

