

Cold Weather Warning: IMPACTION

by Heather Smith Thomas

A common winter problem in horses is impaction, caused by not drinking enough water. If the horse is at pasture with a water source that freezes up, or his automatic waterer quits working, or his tub of ice is not dumped out and replaced with water often enough, he may become short on fluid. The owner may diligently fill the buckets or tub as usual, but if most of it freezes before it is drunk, the horse may be seriously shortchanged. This is all too common if the horse is watered just in the evenings. When nights are long and cold the horse doesn't drink as much as he would during the daytime—but if his tub freezes up at night, he has no water the next morning and goes thirsty until his owner comes home from work and refills the tub or bucket.

The horse eventually becomes dehydrated; the material within the digestive tract dries out, and the horse is constipated. He doesn't have enough fluid in his gut to keep the feed moving through it properly. Impaction may occur before the owner realizes what's happening. The horse will continue to eat at first, then becomes less interested in food and does not clean up his hay. The gut is already feeling "full" so he's not very hungry. He may look drawn up in the flanks (figure 1), and may start to show signs of mild colic.

The problem may go unnoticed for several days because first signs of trouble are usually mild. Yet if not treated and corrected, it can be just as serious (or fatal) as a more acute case of colic. Lack of water usually causes impaction of the large intestine, which is not as serious as impaction of the cecum or valve between small intestine and cecum (these are harder to treat successfully). There is more time to correct it, and treatment (mineral oil and water by stomach tube) is usually effective.

The horse is in moderate pain and constipated, dull and sluggish. He may drink a little water, but not enough. Rectal examination by a veterinarian will reveal firm enlargements in the intestine and a rectum full of hard, dry fecal balls. The effect of impaction is more serious in horses than in most other animals, because of the tremendous capacity of the large intestine. Dry fecal material may gradually accumulate there until it causes enough distention to create pain and colic.

Moderate pain may continue for 3 or 4 days or even a week or more. The horse is not violent, and bouts of pain are moderate and come at intervals. The horse may stretch, lie down, or paw. Manure is passed infrequently and in small amounts; the balls are hard and covered with thick, sticky mucus.

Most cases will respond to treatment, especially if given as soon as the problem is noticed. A horse may die of impaction, however, if the over-distended gut ruptures, or the horse becomes totally

exhausted after a long course of colic.

The best treatment is usually 2 to 4 quarts of mineral oil (by stomach tube, along with a gallon or 2 of warm water to soften the mass of feed in the gut—the water will permeate and soften the dry mass better than mineral oil). The oil helps lubricate the gut contents so they can pass through more easily. If the problem is not relieved within 12 hours, more mineral oil and water should be given. In some cases the veterinarian may also give the horse an injection of a drug to stimulate the intestines, after the contents have been softened up by the water and lubricated with oil.

Prevention of impaction is much better than having to treat it, making sure horses have good quality feeds (not coarse) and plenty of water. Especially make sure he is drinking enough in cold weather. He doesn't like to drink cold water when he's cold, and is more apt to drink during the daytime than at night. Giving him warm water or keeping his water warm with a tank heater, or using an insulated bucket to keep water from freezing can help solve the problem of having it freeze up before he drinks it.

Some horses can get by eating snow, but this is always risky, since they may not get enough moisture if snow is dry and crusty. It's always better to have a good, dependable water supply, or break ice daily, or use a tank or bucket heater and make sure it is working. And if you are breaking ice on a stream, ditch or pond, make sure the horses are using the water hole. If they are afraid to step out on ice, you may have to sprinkle dirt or gravel on it to give them traction so they are not afraid to get to the water.



Figure 1. A colicking horse may become drawn up in the flanks.

