

Summer Management



For many equestrians, Summer equals sport! However, seasonal variations in temperature and rainfall present challenges which must be appropriately managed in order to avoid problems through your sporting calendar.

Exercise, travelling and competing

With the extreme temperature variability that we see in the UK, it is virtually impossible to allow a sufficient period of adaptation to enable your horse to cope with high temperatures.

- Aim to exercise/travel during the morning or evening and avoid the midday heat where possible
- Allow access to water before and after competition
- Hand grazing on arrival is ideal to aid rehydration and drainage of fluids from the airways
- Ensure your horse is achieving the correct electrolyte balance to avoid excess losses through sweat
- Monitor your horse for signs of heat stress and dehydration
- Be cautious of temperatures inside your lorry/box; ventilate as best you can
- Plan ahead for long trips - pre and post-trip electrolytes can be administered intravenously, by nasogastric tube, orally as a paste or in the feed. Always include travel breaks with hand grazing and water

Water, Electrolytes and Dehydration

A horse is comprised of 60% water and has an average daily water intake of 5% of their body weight. Intake is influenced by the water content of the food, level of activity and climate.

Electrolytes are involved with fluid and waste management and muscle function. They are lost with water in the faeces, urine and sweat and excess losses are expected when competing/exercising, particularly during hot weather. Deficiencies can exacerbate conditions such as dehydration and tying-up.

Dehydration beyond 5% loss of body water is known to affect performance. Dehydration puts greater strain on the heart, affects brain and muscle function and can lead to colic, kidney failure and death.

- Always ensure adequate supply of clean fresh water to all horses, especially when grazed in groups
- Ensure your horse is receiving appropriate electrolyte supplements; most hard feeds contain good levels of salt for hard work in normal weather but more may be needed in hot weather; consider asking our advice - too much sodium can do as much harm as too little. Don't trust a nutritionist who says you can't overdo salt. (Editor's note!)
- Sodium, potassium, calcium and magnesium are the elements of concern and in a good electrolyte supplement all will be present as all are lost in sweat - if needed we can test for these with a blood and urine test eg. for a horse which recurrently ties up.
- Frequently monitor and observe your horse for signs of dehydration - pinch the horse's skin over its neck, a delay in returning to the normal flat position may indicate dehydration. Monitor the colour and texture of your horse's gums, they should be pink and moist, not dark to purple or tacky. Increased respiratory and heart rates may also indicate dehydration, you

may be able to visualise a bounding pulse in your horse's jugular vein. Essentially, if your horse has worked hard in hot weather and sweated, they will be dehydrated, the important thing is to recognise how much attention they will need to return to normal.

Heat Stroke

Having had heat stroke myself, I can attest that the issue is no laughing matter! This condition results from excessive and over-heating (e.g. during exercise) and as the horse is unable to cool itself rapidly enough, long-term physical damage and death can occur.

The signs of heatstroke include the following:

- Rapid heart and breathing rates and a potentially irregular heart rhythm
- Excessive sweating (leads to further electrolyte loss)
- Lethargy or conversely, restlessness
- Muscle spasm which may resemble tying-up
- Incoordination or collapse

In the event of heat stroke occurring after intense exercise your horse will slow down quickly, may tie up and adopt a base wide stance, sweat and blow excessively and may have a glazed look in their eye - this is the time to get the cold water and get in the shade!

If you suspect heatstroke, speak to the event vet or give us a call. We would likely administer intravenous electrolytes and fluids in order to replace and prevent extreme losses from your horse. You should immediately and aggressively begin to cool your horse with cold water especially over the large muscle masses on the quarters. You may use fans, find shade and ice the water and continue to do so until signs begin to improve. If the horse can walk do so gently but fans and the shade come first.

If in doubt watch what they do at 3DE's - the rider slowly eases the horse down then jumps off and a fully prepared team takes over aggressive cooling of the horse - or Aintree with a specific tented area with cooling fans and iced water stations.



If you have a thermometer, the normal temperature for a horse is approximately 37-38.5°C and in cases of heatstroke this number is likely to be close to 40°C.

Sunburn

The non-pigmented (pink) areas of skin, most commonly found on the muzzle and legs of white faced horses is very susceptible to sunburn.

- This can result in blistering, pain and peeling skin.
- Human-grade sun cream is perfectly good as a protectant on horses, I would recommend choosing one with a high SPF, ideally for sensitive skin.
- Test the sun cream on a small area of pink skin to ensure there is no allergic reaction to the product. Provided the horse does not have a reaction, sun cream should be frequently applied to all areas of pink skin.
- Shade and masks may also be useful.

Occasionally internal issues and toxins such as those from Ragwort consumption may exacerbate sunburn so if it happens unexpectedly seek our advice.

Skin parasites

Sweet itch is an insect bite hypersensitivity caused by a midge known as *Culicoides*. It is the most common allergic skin condition in horses and is most prevalent from March to November. The midge bites the horse's skin and the allergic reaction is to a protein in the midge's saliva.

Signs include:

- Intense itching, particularly around the tail dock
- Crusty, sore and broken skin
- Lethargic, restless attitude

Management of the condition is centred on keeping the midges away from at risk or affected horses.

- Poo-pick the fields regularly and ensure that the dung pile is not close to grazing/stabled animals
- Avoid fields containing natural water sources which are required for the midge larvae to develop.
- Fly rugs and repellents are useful, particularly in at-risk horses and it may be necessary to stable your horse at dawn and dusk, the highest risk periods.
- Should your horses skin become very irritated and inflamed, please contact us to arrange veterinary treatment

Best wishes for the rest of the summer

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