Ooly coats don’t cover all of the bases. This article addresses common and pivotal oversights in winter horse care. These simple routines minimize risk for serious illness and injury, while helping to develop a willing and confident partnership.

**Cold Air**

We tightly close up our houses. But, if you seal the barn, horses may get sick. Always leave plenty of fresh air circulating. And, pick stalls often. Ammonia, an offgas of urine, is poisonous. Keep clean air moving. Use your judgment in this matter. Days and horses differ. Windows that don’t blow directly on the horses can be left somewhat open.

If horses are turned out, be sure that clean water is available. Snow is a tasty snack, but it does little to satisfy thirst.
On very cold days, leaving the barn door open just four to eight inches on each end of the barn may be adequate. Be consistent about adjusting to the weather conditions, always leaving plenty of fresh air circulating.

I never understood why old-timers were so adamant about bundling horses and letting wind blow through the barn. It seemed counterintuitive to me, until I taught a clinic in a barn that was sealed tight. I realized the owner broke the big fresh air rule, but I never knew why it was so strongly enforced. Even though the barn was clean, as a result of breathing the fumes all day, I spent that night in the hospital emergency room, buckled over in pain. Now I know why it is important to keep air really fresh and moving.

Hydration

Leave a clean bucket of water in front of the stable so horses get in the habit of drinking. If you let them drink to their desire after work, they cool out faster and keep hydrated. A walk and water bucket is especially important on hot and cold days. If your routine is consistent, horses look forward to a few sips after walking out and before grooming or bathing.

Water is crucial to every cellular function in the body, including regulating temperature and digestion. Because water is so critical, be sure it is super clean and not frozen. That goes for in stalls and outside for long turnouts. A sound routine is to scrub and rinse water buckets daily. Scour all buckets and feed tubs with dish soap once a week.

Digestion

Colic can kill horses within hours. So, you need to keep their digestive track hydrated. Blockages can be deadly. Even with surgery, horses rarely come back to work with the same verve.

Your best colic strategy is prevention. The warm bran mash is a tried-and-true way to cut most colic off at the pass. Do not use hot water as it will shock and tax the system. Before days off and big changes in the weather, put plenty of warm water in a quart or two of bran with a little sweet grain. Horses love their soupy mashes, and these mashes do wonders to promote well-being.

Be sure to wet the bran so it may expand before feeding. Otherwise, it will absorb any moisture and enlarge in the gut, which will promote colic. Adding warm water to grain is a good way to assure good hydration. Moldy grain has the potential to be lethal. Be sure you use all of the old grain before adding more to a bin or can. If grain is left in a horse’s feed tub, empty it before feeding the next meal. Clean is safe.

Exercise aids digestion. So, go easy on their systems when stalled and add roughage. If horses are not able to be turned out, cut their grain ration and increase hay.

If the weather is hot or cold, hanging a salt block allows horses to adjust as needed. If a saltblock is left on the ground, inside or outside, it becomes a grimy mess and will not be utilized. Hanging on a wall, salt is more appealing and more readily accessible.

Turnout

If horses are outside for a long period of time, make sure enough clean and unfrozen water is available. If there is no grass, provide hay. Be sure piles are separated, so that shy horses can eat. If you have a shed, put some hay outside as well, on the side sheltered from the wind. That way, timid horses are sure to munch.

Spray lubricant on moveable parts of fasteners that secure gates. WD40®, or the like, may keep snaps from freezing.

When horses are inside, be sure a halter and lead hangs on each stall. Do not wait for a fire or another tragedy to learn the importance of this habit.

Clothes

Cover the kidneys! It is most important to keep the back warm. A wool cooler over the kidneys can avert sickness and stiffness that induce injury. Throw one behind the saddle when you are walking to warm up or cool out. As soon as the saddle or harness comes off, cover the back with one or two coolers. The wool will keep the back toasty as well as wick off the moisture to dry faster. Closing the chest is optional, depending on the weather and draftiness.
Horses that sweat in clothes are likely to colic. So, adding a layer at night check (around 9 or 10 PM) usually works well. Remember, horses can lie down to warm up. But, they will get sick if they become too hot. I check the shoulders and loin for comfort. If ears are cold, the horse is already chilled.

Make sure the turnout rugs are clean and dry. Marking the size in big numbers on the inside of the chest flap makes it easy for anyone to find the right rug.

Proper fit, as well as a vigorous daily grooming, can help prevent shoulder rubs. You want to minimize pressured friction as well as stimulate and exfoliate to release protective oils. Natural oils moisturize and fortify, keeping hair and skin supple, hence resilient. Dry skin breaks and cannot support healthy hair growth. Salt is the worst culprit for stripping coats. So, groom before and after work to remove sweat. Make sure your shampoo specifies: no salt, as it is a standard ingredient.

**Mud and Snow**

Mud and dampness make for crud on heels, called scratches. The condition can cause severe lameness and become a systemic infection. To prevent scratches, dry legs very well every time a horse comes in from work or turnout.

Snow balled up in horses’ feet is unstable. It can make horses unsteady and lack confidence. Hoof dressing, or a cooking spray or petroleum jelly applied to the bottom of hooves can keep snow from balling up. None are perfect solutions, but they may help.

**Tack**

Before bridling, warm the bit by rubbing it between your hands and blowing on it. Surely, you want to start your ride or drive with everyone game.
Be sure to store leather in trunks or hanging from hooks, so mice do not snack on tack.

**Management**

A horse, confident his needs will be met, is the most relaxed and willing partner. Plus, fewer problems mean lower costs. So, keep tuned in. Observe changes in conditions as well as how your horse responds to them. If you can calibrate your routine to best-fit needs and situations, winter can be most enjoyable for all.

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Ruthann not only shares best care practices of elite horsemen, she also develops products that make quality care easier. Her award-winning Lucky Braids™ Coat Care and Braiding products are celebrated for uniquely solving age-old issues such as: tail rubbing, breakage, stains, braiding, conditioning and more. Product of the Year, Lucky Braids All-In-One Shampoo, allows you to use three products instead of 11, while enjoying superior results. Stay tuned for more resources to save you time, money and soundness while keeping horses’ hearts big to win at: LuckyBraids.com; Facebook.com/ShinyHappyHorses; and Twitter @topturnout.

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**Sherry Robertson as told by Ruthann**

If you ask Sherry, she’ll say she learned so much because she listened to all the great grooms and trainers for all her life. On my daily morning greeting route for the decades I spent braiding, I learned a better way of something from her every day. That mind for perfection is part of why Sherry has prepared and shown some of the greatest sport horses of all time. Her keen eye and masterful horsemanship has raised the bar of care and management of horses for over half a century. We are delighted to have her share with us important insights to winter routines. Sherry’s rarely highlighted information is pivotal to successful days in the barn. Thank you, Sherry!