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News Years Resolutions 10 tips for healthier horses in 2010

In this article, Erik Belloy, Partner at House & Jackson, gives horse owners some useful tips for routine health care for your horse.

I thought it would be useful to give you my top ten tips for providing comfort and health to your horse in throughout the year. As is typical with New Years resolutions, many of the things that will be discussed will be familiar to most horse owners. However, a regular, gentle reminder in order for us to do the right thing by our horses never goes amiss. Caring for horses is a big commitment, both in time and money. These tips are likely to save you money in emergency call out or days off with ailments.

Provide fresh air and keep your horse's temperature comfortable.

Many horse owners have a tendency to see horses as large humans. In doing so, vents and access to open air often gets blocked up when the temperatures outside drop. This is frequently the wrong thing to do, because horses thrive on good, clean fresh air. A mild draught is infinitely preferable to stale stable air. Likewise, owners have a tendency to over-rug their horses in an attempt to make them feel very cosy and comfortable. Stabled horses that are clipped do require some protection from the elements but several rugs, large boots and excessive horse clothing are absolutely not necessary to keep your horse comfortable. Indeed, they are more likely to cause skin conditions and other problems.

Avoid worm burdens.

In order to stop your horse becoming ill due to worm infestations, you must keep up regular worming of all horses on a yard at the same time. Even better, regular picking up of all the droppings in the field will slowly but surely lead to de-contamination of the paddocks. De-contamination, particularly if regular worming has happened in previous years will lead to hardly any larvae being present on the horse's grazing. Regular (twice a year at least) worm egg counts are the best

way to monitor whether your worming programme is suitable for your yard. Secondly, by looking at dung samples under the microscope, strategic worming can be carried out. This means that wormers are only used in well managed yards when there is evidence of worms being present. Speak to your vet to adapt a worming programme and testing to your specific needs.

Keep vaccinations up to date.

Vaccinations will protect horses from some of the most infectious diseases. Regular protection against tetanus is an absolute must, but flu vaccination is also strongly advisable. Vaccination against herpes is optional, but very important in competition and stud situations. Bear in mind that your horse may not be eligible to compete if not vaccinated against flu.

Maintain fitness and avoid obesity.

Recent research has proved that many horses suffer from type 2 diabetes, a disease that occurs due to excessive feeding and lack of exercise. To keep your horse healthy, regular exercise for those horses that have not got debilitating diseases is vital. Also, to avoid your horse becoming ill with metabolic syndrome or insulin resistance, and to avoid it getting laminitis make sure that you only feed as much as is necessary to keep it in a healthy condition score. Unfortunately the horses that are regularly seen in pictures as winners of showing competitions are not the correct examples.

Veterinary care and budgeting.

It is vital to make provision for emergency treatments in order for your horse to have access to veterinary care when needed. This provision can be through regular payment into an insurance scheme or by setting aside a small sum each month in case a disaster should occur. It is obviously not fair that the horse should suffer due to an economic downturn.

Ensure that the horse receives regular dentistry.

In order for horses to carry on in comfort to a ripe old age, regular rasping of the teeth is vital. Make sure you discuss your horse's needs for dentistry with your

vet. Horses that are in regular work, and particularly those that are competing need to have their teeth rasped frequently in order to avoid them suffering pain in the mouth whilst being worked. Horses teeth will keep growing out continuously and are ground down against opposing teeth. If horses have lost teeth, the need for regular dentistry increases. When ground down naturally through chewing, sharp edges are left that can be rasped away by your vet or a BEVA approved dental technician.

Feed a fibre-based diet..

Horses thrive on good fibre feed. It is important we avoid too much grain in the diet of horses. Speak to your vet or feed merchant about providing feeds that have high fibre content because this is important for hoof and gut health. Bear in mind that feeding from the floor is healthier than feeding from a height. Natural drainage from the respiratory tract and better alignment of the teeth will result from feeding from the floor.

Get your horse shod and trimmed regularly.

Make sure you ask your farrier to attend to the horse on a regular basis, usually every five to seven weeks. Good shoeing and ensuring that the feet are kept trimmed will provide the horse with a good platform to stand on, and comfort for working. If feet are out of balance, for example if the outside heel is higher than the inside heel, this will result in unnecessary stretching of ligaments and crushing of joints.

Protected from flies and parasites.

Many cobs will suffer from itchy legs, due to leg mites, which is exhibited by stamping of the feet, rubbing the legs or even chewing at the legs. Likewise, some horses are very irritated by flies or biting insects, and some (with sweet itch) may even be

allergic to bites from certain insects. For those horses that are extremely sensitive, severe itchiness is very uncomfortable. Those horses that are allergic to biting insects should get protection from netting fly rugs from early March to late October in order to stay as itch free as possible. Horses that are prone to leg mites should receive regular treatment to avoid high burdens and severe itchiness.

Provide regular health checks.

Familiarise yourself with your horse's health and regularly check for changes in health status. Why not ask your vet to check your horse over on a regular basis. It is quite common for horses to have regular back checks that will only address a very small area of the horse. However, by asking your vet to carry out a regular health check, you can get a more in-depth picture of any areas that may require special attention in the future, possibly detecting problems early and saving you money in the longer term.

I wish all owners a very prosperous, and all horses a very healthy 2010

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Write to us before the 15th of the month.
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