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EXTRA



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Managing Horses on Full-Time Turnout

Care considerations and tips for making the switch to 24/7 turnout

Christa Lesté-Lasserre, MA

If you're considering changing your housing system to 24/7 pasture, you're not alone. As scientists reveal more equine welfare benefits of keeping horses out full time, owners are opening their minds—and their barn doors—to a more “natural” way of life for their equids.

Free to roam, graze selectively, and interact with herdmates, horses on 24/7 pasture have more opportunities than stalled horses to meet their ethological (behavioral)

needs, researchers say. Not limited to leisure horses, breeding stock, or retirees, pastures can make great homes for horses of all breeds and disciplines, the exception being those at risk of laminitis.

But good pasturing isn't just about turning horses out and letting them adapt to whatever they encounter. There's plenty of management left for us to do—and it's not always as obvious as it might seem.

“People who practice group housing

understand that it actually demands much more of the caretaker (than traditional housing),” says Jan Ladewig, DVM, PhD, professor in Animal Welfare and Ethology at Copenhagen University's Department of Large Animal Sciences, in Denmark. “It requires more knowledge about horse behavior in general, as well as more knowledge of each individual horse.”

Katie Sheats, DVM, PhD, Dipl. ACVIM, assistant professor of equine primary care at



Automatic waterers in pastures can relieve handlers of constant cleaning and refilling duties.

North Carolina State University, in Raleigh, agrees. Her university keeps a teaching herd on pasture 24/7. “There’s a misconception that it’s easier,” she says.

From skin and foot care to nutrition and mental state, we continue to have an important role in overseeing the health and welfare of our pasture-kept horses.

Hydration

Water is “the most important nutritional component,” Sheats says. Like stalled horses, those at pasture need a constant source of clean, readily available water. “If they have still water in a large tub, it has to be checked daily,” she says. “First and foremost, you have to make sure it’s still there.”

Horses’ water consumption can change according to weather conditions and workload, and tubs—whether plastic, metal, fiberglass, or concrete—can break or leak.

Clean water can also turn filthy in a hurry, depending on how frequently you empty it, sunlight exposure, and what falls into it, she adds. Leaves and branches can rot over time, and wild animals can fall in and drown. Animal decomposition can contaminate the water with bacteria that can provoke serious diseases in horses such as botulism.

Algae can build up over time in still-water tubs and, while a small amount is rarely a problem, if water becomes unpalatable, horses might stop drinking, putting them at risk of dehydration. “It is recommended to scrub buckets and tubs once a week,” says Sheats, who keeps her own two horses on a home pasture 24/7.

Automatic waterers can relieve handlers of constant cleaning and refilling duties, she says. But they and the pipes that feed them can pose their own challenges, such as freezing in winter. “It’s good to check them twice a day to be sure they’re still running,” she says.

Another issue: Most automatic waterers don’t give feedback on consumption (a few do). “If you can’t see how much the horse is drinking, you’ll need to keep an eye on his hydration status by ensuring his skin springs back quickly when pinched and gums feel moist,” Sheats says.

Nutrition

Equine diets are very individualized. Hard keepers might need access to more abundant, richer forage, whereas easy-keeping “fat little ponies” might do better “kept on pastures that have been grazed by other animals so that they have to work more—and

take more steps—when grazing,” Ladewig says.

Most horses in light to moderate work living on pasture 24/7 typically do well on their natural forage diet complemented by trace minerals and a ration balancer, says Sheats. But, she adds, this will depend on pasture grass, geographic location, and time of year. “In our region,” Sheats says, “it is common to supplement pastured horses with hay, because pasture acreage is often too small or stocking density is too high to maintain an adequate supply of nutritious grasses year-round.”

Growing horses, hard-working athletes, and pregnant/nursing mares might also need more calories than grass alone can provide. Because each pasture and animal is unique, evaluate individual nutritional needs on a horse-by-horse basis.

“The best you can do is pay attention to the condition of the horse—in other words, noticing if their ribs are standing out or if they are completely buried in a layer of fat,” says Ladewig.

If your horse falls into the “layer of fat” category, you’ll want to intervene, because obesity can increase horses’ risk of joint issues, laminitis, and other health concerns, says Patricia Harris, MA, VetMB, PhD, Dipl. ECVN, MRCVS, head of the Equine Studies Group at the WALTHAM Petcare Science Institute, in Waltham on the Wolds, U.K. She and her team have studied strip grazing as a useful tool for restricting weight gain in pastured horses.

With strip grazing handlers keep horses in a fenced-off section of a larger pasture, and they move the fences over by about a foot every day (keeping the same size fenced-in area). This keeps equids grazing all day on overgrazed areas, with a strip of ungrazed, more nutritive grass consistent with their dietary needs, says Harris.

Grazing muzzles can be a useful alternative, provided they fit correctly and you check them regularly. Many horses, however, learn to graze very efficiently through them, so monitoring body condition remains critical.

On the flip side, horses on poor-quality pastures (especially in winter) and underweight horses need additional forage and/or complementary feed. The goal is to ensure they have enough free-choice forage to meet

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Ensure lower-ranking herd members can access food, water, and shelter without getting trapped.

their needs for chewing and consuming most of the day and night.

Hoof Care

Horses at pasture might not need shoes as much as their stalled counterparts because they move around more normally than when they're standing all day, our sources say. Without shoes, blood circulation in the foot increases, allowing the hoof wall and sole to thicken, says Ladewig. If you remove your pastured horse's shoes, however, note that it can take several months to more than a year for this thickening, particularly of the sole, to occur.

Removing shoes, at least the hinds, is also safer for horses sharing the same living space, he adds, as shod horses can cause more damage when they kick.

However, don't cut back on farrier visits, says Sheats. "People often think, 'Oh he's outdoors and barefoot, so he can go longer, maybe eight weeks, between trims,'" she says. "But it depends on the horse. In some cases waiting eight weeks between trims can lead to overgrown toes and flat feet."

Rather, more frequent trims, every three to four weeks, can help restore and maintain

a healthier hoof for barefoot pasture horses, she explains.

If a horse works on hard or rocky terrain, has certain foot/limb conditions, or performs in a concussive discipline such as show jumping or eventing, though, he probably needs shoes even as a pasture horse, says Ladewig.

Ideal pasture footing is firm, grassy ground, Sheats says. But even in optimal enclosures high-traffic areas often get muddy, which can lead to hoof cracks, white line disease, and other foot ailments. Owners can improve footing in high-traffic areas with ground stabilizers and good drainage, she says. When pastures get muddy, establish a rotation schedule and temporarily fence off sections to give them a chance to recover from constant treading.

While it's important to pick horses' feet every day—especially to check for injury or lodged rocks—the most critical thing is daily observation, Sheats explains. "You need to notice if he's not walking normally so you can intervene right away, and you need to know when was the last time he was walking normally, because that's important information to tell the farrier and vet," she says.

Preventive Care

Healthy adult pasture horses typically need twice-annual wellness exams and preventive care visits, says Sheats.

"These visits are the best way to keep a horse in optimum health by preventing vaccinateable diseases, maintaining oral health, identifying issues that require correction (i.e., performance problems, weight gain or loss, hoof issues, dental abnormalities), assessing maintenance of chronic health conditions (e.g., pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction aka Cushing's, equine asthma), and achieving early diagnosis of a new disease that may have insidious onset," she explains. "At these visits the veterinarians can also answer management-related questions and provide owners with access to additional resources."

Skin and Thermodynamics

Away from the protective cover of the barn roof, horses' skin and hair get a lot of exposure to the elements. Moisture is the main concern, which can put horses (especially those in warmer climates) at risk of developing the bacterial disease rain rot, says Ladewig. Still, healthy coats usually

have an oily skin coating that helps ward off moisture, he adds.

Regardless of coat quality, horses should always have access to shelter or shade trees so they can choose to get out of the rain, wind and other severe weather, or sun. Regular grooming—one or two times a week—can also remove dirt and air out the skin, helping prevent bacterial growth. If your horse does develop rain rot, keep him indoors or put a rain sheet on him during wet weather while he heals.

Shelter is also critical for protecting horses—especially those with white hair and pink skin—from sun exposure. In addition, it can give them a break from flying insects. You might need to apply sunscreen and insect repellent to sensitive horses more frequently.

Blanketing horses can disrupt their natural thermodynamics, Ladewig says. If they're kept outdoors and left unclipped, most horses grow enough hair to stay warm in winter, especially if you provide them with adequate supplemental forage, which helps them produce heat through the "internal combustion" of digestion. Blankets also deny horses the insulating effect of piloerection—raising of the hairs by skin muscles when it's cold out.

Body-clipped horses, seniors, and more cold-sensitive breeds such as Thoroughbreds and Arabians, however, might need blankets during particularly cold and windy days, Ladewig says. Lethargic or shivering horses might be too cold and, if they have body temperatures lower than 99.5 degrees Fahrenheit, need a blanket. Just remember to remove blankets regularly to check for rubs and body condition, says Harris.

Herd Dynamics

Releasing a group of horses together in a pasture can be dangerous if not done correctly, our sources say. It's an art that requires careful observation and knowledge of individual horses and their relationships with each other.

Horses develop complex hierarchies over time, and the best situation is when the groups are stable, says Sheats. "It's the introduction and removal of a horse from a group that can upset the structure and create problems," she explains.



If your farm is near a busy road, consider installing a double perimeter of fencing.

When introducing a new horse, group him with one or two "calm" herd members, separately from the others, for a few days before putting everyone together, suggests Ladewig. Generally speaking, larger groups and larger pastures allow for more peaceful hierarchy establishment after this initial introduction to a few horses—probably due to the extra space that lets them distance themselves when needed, he adds.

Ensure lower-ranking individuals can access food, water, and shelter without the risk of getting trapped, our sources say. Keep food and water away from fences, and offer them at several locations set far apart from each other. Avoid shelters with only one door; they should either be fully open on one side or have two doorways so lower-ranking horses can escape when needed.

Good Security

Stalled horses rarely end up loose on a road because they have so many barriers keeping them in. But pasture horses often have a single line of fence stopping them from free-roaming, so regular fence checks are critical, says Sheats.

"Walk the perimeter or drive it every day," she recommends. "Better yet, have a double

perimeter, especially if your farm is near a busy road."

Falling trees, wind, and the horses themselves can down fences, and a second security fence can keep them safe, she says. For electric fences, regular maintenance includes checking the current and controlling grass/weed growth under the bottom strand, because this can interfere with the electrification. "I have a current detector box that informs me if there's an issue, so that simplifies things," Sheats says.

Never leave your horses more than a day without having someone check on them, she says. Even if they've got unlimited food and water, they still need someone to look out for their health and safety in case of injuries, fence failures, or sudden illnesses such as colic.

"At the very least, someone needs to come close enough to make a visual inspection, make sure they're ambulating normally, appear to have a good appetite, and that their water is okay," says Sheats.

Take-Home Message

It takes time and effort to maintain horses on 24/7 pasture in groups, says Ladewig, but knowing your horses are happier and healthier outdoors is worth the work. **SM**