

Keeping Your (Horses) Cool

As I write I have just seen a weather forecast saying it will tip down this weekend in Yorkshire!

Here are a few helpful hints for competing in the heat:

Horses release heat during exercise by sweating and by increasing their breathing rates. On a breezy day you may not realise that your horse is sweating because the sweat evaporates quickly. In general, the hotter the temperature the greater the loss of water and salts.

A normal 500kg horse can lose 10 litres of fluid in a 2 hour exercise.

The horse is designed as an athlete with large areas of compact muscle tissue. As muscles move they generate heat. A normal horse will finish strenuous exercise with a body temperature several degrees higher than normal. This all needs to return to normal before the kidneys and bowel can function.

So when you finish exercise, particularly in the hot weather, you need to think about 3 things

1. Cooling your horse
2. Giving it salts in the form of electrolytes.
3. Replacing fluid.

After exercise if it's hot, try to get your horse into the shade.

The now well-recognised method of cooling is to use lots of cool water on the major muscle blocks of the rump, back and neck and shoulders, allow the horse to walk a little so the water draws heat from the body, scrape the water off and repeat until the skin feels cool and the horse no longer has flared nostrils or is breathing heavily. The process usually takes 20 minutes or so, and you will need several buckets.

There is no harm in letting the horse drink a little during this time if it wants to. Often they prefer warm water or water with electrolytes dissolved in it.

Do not offer food for a further 15 mins, and always offer water first.

Electrolytes are available from almost anywhere, in powder or paste form and can be offered in water or put in food, or you can give a paste like a wormer. Any horse in reasonably hard work eg carriage driving, should be getting electrolytes daily, it's nearly impossible to give to much of them and they are cheap!

Dehydration leads to several unpleasant symptoms including colic, depression, a greater susceptibility to injury, azoturia and kidney failure.

Don't forget clipping, which reduces fluid losses, fly sheets and (legal) fly sprays, and in general the darker the coat colour, the more heat will be absorbed by the poor horse!.