

How essential is clean water to horses?



All horses must have access to clean drinking water 24 hours a day. Horses should always be provided with more water than they need so that there is no risk of them not getting enough to drink.

An average 500kg (approximately 15hh) horse drinks around 30-50 litres a day. This amount may be higher in hot weather (because the horse will sweat more and use up water reserves in the body) and if working very hard (again the horse will sweat more). A mare with a foal needs more because the milk that she is making to feed the foal requires water. Horses that are grazing on rapidly growing grass will usually drink less because the grass that they are eating has a high water content compared to more mature grass and hay which is very dry.



A horse must always have access to abundant clean water.

Clean uncontaminated water is a must for horses. If horses are forced to drink water that is contaminated with dirt, algae or manure/urine they can become sick. In addition to having a delicate digestive system horses are

unable to vomit (a valve on the top of the stomach prevents vomiting) so once a horse has ingested food or water it has to pass right through the system – no matter how bad that food or water is (unlike a dog for example which can vomit and therefore quickly get rid of bad food or water).

So you can see that the amount that your horse needs to drink can vary on a daily basis. Always make sure your horse has more than enough rather than risk your horse becoming dehydrated.

Horses have a very good sense of smell and taste and will refuse to drink, even to the point of dehydration, if their water supply is polluted, stagnant or sometimes even if the water supply changes suddenly - irrespective of whether the water is clean or not.

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When you go to a competition try to take some familiar water from home with you.

travelling and then flavour the new source of water, gradually reducing the flavour until the horse has accepted the new water source.

There are two main reasons why horses need so much water. Horses have a digestive system that requires lots of clean fresh water in order to function properly. Their naturally high fibre diet (grass, hay etc.) requires high levels of water to help keep the fibre moving through the digestive system. If horses have restricted access to water or have only poor quality water and do not drink enough they are at risk of impaction colic (where fibre blocks the digestive system). Colic (in its various forms) can be a very serious condition in horses. Impaction colic needs immediate veterinary attention.

Horses are one of the few animals (including humans) that rely on sweating to cool themselves down. This requires lots of water so when horses are working hard it is especially important that they do not have their access to water restricted or the horse will become dehydrated.



The high fibre diet of horses means that they need lots of clean water in order to digest it.

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It is an outdated myth that you should withhold water from horses after work. If a horse has just completed very fast work (i.e. finished a race) they should be allowed to drink, then be walked for a few minutes, then be allowed to drink again. This procedure should be carried on until the horse has drunk its fill and the heart rate has returned to normal. The sport of endurance racing has proved that to withhold water from horses is dangerous. Horses taking part in endurance races or long trail rides should be allowed to drink throughout the day.

.If your horses are drinking from a natural water source (such as a creek/stream/dam/lake etc) you need to make sure that the access is safe. If possible it is better to fence off access to water courses and reticulate (pump) the water to where it is needed (troughs etc.). There are several reasons for this. Horses can destroy the riparian zone which is the vegetation that immediately surrounds a waterway. This vegetation helps to keep the water cool and clean, it filters out nutrients from soil and manure and it provides habitat for wildlife. By fencing and reticulating you will have cleaner water for more of the year.

See our publication *Manure, water and vegetation on a horse property* (2011) for more information about keeping water clean on a horse property.

If your horses are drinking from a natural water source either restrict their access with fencing (shown below) or fence the water source off completely and reticulate the water so that the riparian zone is preserved.



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