

# RUGGING: A VEXED ISSUE

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Jane Duckworth April 2010

During any season of the year, onlookers can usually see a smattering of over-rugged horses sweltering in their paddocks. Even in the winter, areas like southern Queensland will experience winter temperatures in the middle twenties, being much too hot to leave heavy-weight rugs on<sup>1</sup>.

The general public seems to be responding to the RSPCA's message 'Dogs die in hot cars' but what about horse owners being mindful that horses overheat and can die from being over-rugged?

Over the years I have found that the time comes to produce a horse welfare article for a particular publication so I must begin by considering a timely issue I may perhaps bring to readers' attention. Typically, with uncanny regularity a theme presents itself. Whether it is the purchase of a float ('road safety and horses') or how horse welfare and protection groups rise to the occasion ('A year after the Black Saturday bushfires') or this column's focus on rugging, there seems a never ending supply of horse welfare-related issues to discuss. My own experiences and those of friends often seem to provide the subject matter.

The best Australian internet article that I am aware of explaining what can happen to horses that are over-rugged and therefore over-heated is entitled *Horse Welfare: Rugging and grooming at* <http://optimail.com.au/berrime/rugs.htm>

Written by Eva Berriman, an Australian veterinarian and animal welfare consultant, this is such a thought provoking article on a topic that in all probability most horse people don't ever really give much consideration to. Eva states that 'over-rugging is a serious health problem for horses in our harsh Australian conditions.'

Personally I think that there are plenty of beautifully 'dressed', colour co-ordinated ponies and horses out in the paddocks and stabled, but an emphasis on appearance should not take precedence over the utilitarian aspects of rugging.

## Why do we rug horses?

Experts could probably write pages but let's say:

- The rugged horse will be cleaner when you want to ride.
- The coat of a rugged horse will lay flatter, and the horse will look smooth and shiny compared with an unrugged horse that will usually look fluffier.
- Clipped horses need rugs as a replacement for a thick coat of hair.
- Rugs can substitute to some extent for a lack of shelter in bad weather.
- Rugging can protect horses from biting insects if need be.
- Less calories will be burnt off by thin skinned or low weight horses if they are kept cosy when the weather is cold enabling them to hold their condition more readily.

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<sup>1</sup> Eva Berriman, 'Horse welfare: Rugging and grooming,' **Animal Welfare: Human-dependent animals**, June 2008

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The negative side of rugging would include:

- Rugging requires more work. Habitually rugged horses need much more frequent grooming than their unrugged counterparts. Rugs need to be taken on and off regularly, even if a grooming session is not on the agenda.
- Rug injuries are common, particularly from badly fitted rugs.
- Horses that wear rugs must be checked frequently. Twice daily is recommended.
- Horses can suffer terribly from being over-heated. Heat stress can also kill.

## Tips to help minimise rug injuries and health problems:

- ✓ Correctly fit your horse for his rug/rugs to avoid pressure sores and rubbing in general.
- ✓ Always clip leg-strap fasteners in toward the horse to reduce the chances of getting hooked on a wire fence.
- ✓ Do not over-rug, particularly in warm weather. Remember that natural fibres breath and synthetic ones don't so horses can't sweat to cool themselves off, overheat and can develop serious heat stress.
- ✓ Don't over-rug while transporting a horse. Eva Berriman says, '[Horses being transported](#) should not be over-rugged if they are rugged at all. Much depends on the vehicle. The wind chill factor present on the back of an open truck may be completely absent in a closed float. Even if well ventilated, fully enclosed floats and trucks can become very warm inside due to body heat generated by the inmates. Horses should be checked regularly to make sure they are not too hot and even sweating under rugs, particularly if they were loaded before cooling down properly after competition. Temperature can be judged by feeling with the hand.'
- ✓ Don't have neck rugs and hoods on your horse unless really necessary for your own convenience. When these slip horrific injuries can be the result.
- ✓ Check rugged horse regularly to straighten rugs and hoods and to see if any straps have come undone.
- ✓ Leaking rugs can cause rain scald so have rugs repaired or made waterproof again.
- ✓ If you can't get to the horse's paddock regularly do not even start to rug your horse at the beginning of winter! Nature will provide a coat for his protection.
- ✓ Rugging is not a substitute for grooming. More grooming and care is in fact required. Brush him every day.

For owners who compete with their horses rugging is standard. It's a part of horsemanship that we accept as there are benefits for both horse and rider but try not to risk your horse's well-being by over-rugging which can cause heat stress, using ill-fitting or damaged rugs, not supervising your horse adequately or not grooming regularly.

It seems that rugs are a nuisance that we feel can't be done without, so by keeping horses' welfare as the priority and our own convenience secondary maybe a happy balance can be reached. And don't be too frightened to point out to a friend or neighbour that they need to take off heavy rugs on a warm day; the horse would thank you for it if he could!