

Revision Date: July 2004
David Marshall, VMD
Delaware Equine Extension Veterinarian

Horse Water Needs

I have been responding recently through 4-H lectures, newspaper articles, and extension bulletins to the often-overlooked management practices of providing water for our horses. Water is essential for all body systems. That means without maximum daily water intake your horse won't run as fast as it should, his gut will not function as designed making it prone to colic, she will not produce enough milk for her foal stunting its growth; plain and simple: your horse will not perform, show, race, jump, or breed to your expectations or its genetic potential without water and plenty of it.

What you and I need to know and understand about our horses to insure appropriate daily water intake are summarized as follows. The typical adult 1,000 to 1,200 pound horse will drink between 6-10 gallons of water per day. I suggest you build into this 6-10 gallons minimum, a safety margin by providing 20 gallons to each horse per day. This daily 6-10 gallons are what we refer to, as "maintenance needs", that is: what the horse's body needs to keep it alive and well. It does not take into account exercise, milk production, or anything for that matter over and above basic "maintenance". For example, strenuous exercise in hot weather will increase that maintenance need by 2 or 3 times; a horse can lose up to 2-3 gallons per hour in sweat, and a nursing mare will produce 3 gallons of milk per day.

Automatic waterers will work, [we use them here at the University of Delaware] but we observe horses to drink more water daily out of buckets, troughs, or tanks. If using buckets, always place two buckets in each stall per horse. There are several reasons we need two buckets per horse: first, most standard horse water buckets hold only 5 gallons and second, most horses will drink their major water intake during and immediately following their daily hay meal, therefore requiring more than 5 gallons.

I believe it a superior management practice to provide water access for your horses throughout the day as compared to letting horses out of their stall to drink periodically. Keep in mind a horse's stomach is small holding only 2-3 gallons, so they must drink continuously in order to achieve 20 gallons or more under a heavy workload.

Two more principles before I close: the first being clean water and the second being how to water hot horses. The simple rule for clean water is to check the bucket, trough, waterers, or water source at least one time per day; clean [and fill] as necessary. How clean you ask? If it is not clean enough for you to drink out of, you really need to wonder if it's clean enough for your horse. Second, how to water you hot horse or working horse. Simple, allow it to drink during

it's work. In hot weather, never go more than ½ hour without stopping and permitting your horse to drink. On cool spring or fall days, never go longer than 1-2 hours between drinks. Bottom line: let your hot horses drink frequently and to their fill. As long as you keep your horse moving [even at a walk] you will not get into founder or colic problems. They need the water, let them drink. If you plan to put your hot horse “up” for the day, do not permit this hot horse to drink more than one gallon or so every 5-10 minutes until it has cooled or is no longer thirsty.

If this quick review of your horse and it's need for water does not answer your questions, feel free to give me a call here at the University of Delaware or drop me an e-mail. One last item: please give your horse free choice salt, a salt block will do. He will run faster, jump higher, have fewer health problems, and shine more in the show ring with free choice salt and all the fresh water he can drink.