

# Q&A

## HORSECARE

### OUR EXPERT PANEL



**CHARLIE TOMLINSON**  
Vet Charlie works for Hale Veterinary Practice in Wiltshire. She has a particular interest in lameness investigation and chiropractic care.



**ALEXANDRA WESKER**  
Alex writes and consults on equine well-being and nutrition. She has a BSc and MSc in Animal Science and wrote *Natural Feeding for Horses*.



**JUSTINE HARRISON**  
As a certified equine behaviourist, Justine uses the science of behaviour to help owners understand and solve a wide range of issues with their horses.

## She doesn't like the cold

**Q** My mare doesn't seem to like going out when it's cold and waits by the gate to come in. Is this normal?

Elizabeth Phillips, by email

**JUSTINE SAYS** If your horse only waits at the gate when it's cold, then I would say it is the drop in temperature that is the issue.

Ensure she has shelter from the wind or rain and consider investing in a well-fitting rug.

Many horses and ponies can live happily without a rug all year round, but those who are clipped, underweight, ill, older or don't maintain condition well, will need help to keep warm.

Some owners believe their horse doesn't like the cold, when in fact the reason their horse waits at the gate is because there is nothing in the field to eat.

In winter, the grazing on many yards is poor and horses know there will be a haynet and feed in their stable, when they come in.

Ensure your horse has plenty of ad-lib forage in the field. The bacterial fermentation of fibre in the hindgut produces heat to keep horses warm, so they must have a steady supply of forage available.



Horses will stand by the gate if there is no grazing

## Getting his five a day

**Q** Is it safe to feed my horse vegetable scraps from my kitchen? I know carrots, swedes and parsnips are safe, but what about cabbage, cauliflower, sprouts and potatoes?

Myra Taylor, Guildford, Surrey

**ALEXANDRA SAYS** Cabbage, cauliflower and sprouts are part of the Brassicaceae family of vegetables, as are kale, radish, turnip and broccoli.

The high vitamin C and soluble fibre content make these vegetables sound like a healthy option. However, the gas production associated with them means that feeding more than 50-100



grams should be avoided, as it can lead to gas colic.

Feeding small amounts of cabbage is associated with supporting the digestive system against ulcers, but I would recommend other things first.

Potatoes and tomatoes should be avoided. The green skin of potatoes and tomatoes is toxic and can affect a horse's nervous system and cause colic.

Starch in uncooked potatoes is not broken down in the first part of the digestive system and can lead to gas colic in the hindgut. Especially toxic are the green potato plants which appear above ground.

## My rugs get ripped!

**Q** My gelding and his field mate are great buddies, but the other horse keeps ripping my rugs. Is there anything I can do? It seems a shame to put them out separately, but I can't afford a new rug every week!

Ally Mortimer, by email



Playing in the field can result in torn rugs

**JUSTINE SAYS** A horse's bodycare routine includes self-grooming. They also roll on various surfaces to remove loose hair, dead skin and stimulate the skin's circulation.

This means that rugs are often ripped by horses scratching on fencing.

Horses groom each other – which is called allogrooming – which helps them bond socially, reduces stress and enable them to scratch areas they can't reach.

Many horses will also play when turned out, so rugs can be ripped during these social interactions.

Check your horse isn't too hot in his rug and give him turnout time without a rug so he can itch himself, roll and mutually groom.

Providing some safe toys in the field may result in the horses playing with them, rather than grabbing each other's rugs.



Narcoleptic horses will buckle at the knees as they suddenly fall asleep

## Sleeping disease

**Q** I recently heard about a horse that has narcolepsy. Is this common in horses and can it be treated?

Cheryl Mills, Ipswich, Suffolk

**CHARLIE SAYS** Narcolepsy is a very rare condition in horses and the exact cause is not fully understood.

Narcoleptic horses are seen to suddenly fall asleep, buckling at the knees and collapsing due to complete loss of muscle control (cataplexy). In many instances the horse will wake up before he hits the ground.

Certain activities, such as grooming or saddling-up, can trigger an attack. The horse may appear drowsy with a wide forelimb stance and low head carriage just before it happens.

Sadly, there is no safe, effective treatment in horses. Many of the drugs trialled have severe side-effects, which outweigh any benefits.

As narcolepsy is so rare, it is worth ruling out more common problems first.

Chronic lameness, where it is painful to lie down or get up, can lead to extreme fatigue and cause a horse to fall asleep while standing up.

Bullying or a reluctance to lie down, due to inadequate bedding, can also be to blame.

Some horses may have seizures (epilepsy), although the collapse will be accompanied by stiffened limbs or muscle twitching, rather than the floppy narcoleptic state.

If you suspect your horse has narcolepsy try videoing the episodes to help your vet make that diagnosis.

## How do I avoid winter laminitis?

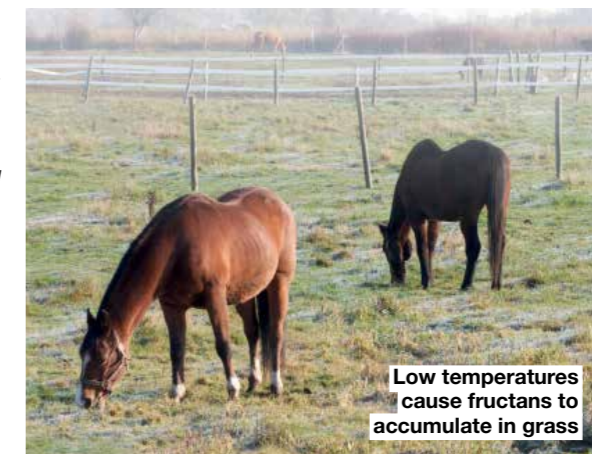
**Q** I'm worried about the possibility of my daughter's pony – who lives out – getting laminitis from frosty grass. Is any horse prone to getting laminitis this way, and how can I avoid it?

Wendy Spooner, by email

**ALEXANDRA SAYS** Laminitis is a complex problem with many factors contributing to it, and research into the disease is ongoing.

Horses are more likely to develop laminitis if they are obese, rather than at a healthy weight. And ponies are more prone to the condition, than warmblood horses.

Your pony is more likely to suffer with the condition during winter months if he has had it before – known as recurrent laminitis – than he is to develop it for the first time.



Low temperatures cause fructans to accumulate in grass

Frosty grass is indeed associated with the development of laminitis due to its high fructan (sugar) content.

## Which hay should I use?

**Q** My hay supplier has three or four types of hay, taken from different fields or made at different times of year. How do I tell which is best?

Emily Shaw, Liverpool

**ALEXANDRA SAYS** Have a close look at the hay before making a purchase. The most important thing is that it contains no poisonous plants or mould. If poisonous plants are present – such as ragwort – do not consider feeding it.

The time of harvest is the next most important factor. The most nutritious hay is harvested before flowering, usually around May. Less nutritious is hay harvested after the grass has flowered, around June.

Hay that is harvested later in the year is likely to provide too little energy, protein, vitamins and minerals for most horses.



The time hay is harvested makes a difference to its nutritional content

Fructan is formed under sunlight and is used for grass growth. Grass growth slows down with low temperatures, causing fructan accumulation.

Letting horses live out all year long allows their digestive system to adapt to any changes in fructan.

The adaptation means horses are less likely to develop laminitis than if they were to suddenly change from a hay diet to frosty pasture.

However, the risk is still high and the more prone your horse is to getting laminitis, the more frosty grass and other factors should be avoided.