

Out and about with...

Marie Rippingale REVN looks at keeping horses hydrated

Along with the fun-filled hours of competing in the summer comes the responsibility of keeping your horse properly hydrated in the heat. Horses, like humans, produce sweat from glands all over their body. As sweat evaporates, the skin cools and helps moderate overall body temperature, preventing overheating. Sweat is made up not only of water, but also electrolytes, most notably sodium and chloride. Therefore, when a horse sweats, they lose these important elements to the environment.



The amount of water a horse actually needs is variable and depends on the animal's size, the ambient temperature and humidity, and the level of activity. In cooler months, a horse at rest can drink up to 36 litres of water per day. This will go up considerably during the hot summer months and with increased activity levels.

When the rate of water and electrolyte loss outweighs the horse's internal balance of these nutrients, it becomes dehydrated. Interestingly, horses do not respond to sweating with increased thirst the way humans do. This is because human sweat contains a greater amount of water than electrolytes. When humans sweat, our internal fluid balance becomes overloaded with electrolytes such as sodium due to the excessive loss of water, and as a response we feel thirsty.

In contrast, equine sweat contains a more equal balance of electrolytes and water, which dampens the thirst response even if the horse is dehydrated. This is why sometimes you can lead a hot horse to water and he/she will not want to drink.

Dehydration is dangerous in that it can be hard to observe. Mild dehydration may easily go unnoticed but can quickly progress if the horse is not rested and offered a chance to hydrate. A decrease in a horse's athletic performance is sometimes the first sign of significant dehydration: The proper balance of water and electrolytes is necessary to promote healthy muscle and nerve function.

The following are some tips to help you to keep your horses hydrated when at a competition:

- Always take plenty of fresh, clean water with you to a competition. If your horse is a fussy drinker, take some water from their own water bucket/field trough with you.
- Offer your horse a drink when you arrive at the show ground. Travelling on its own can lead to dehydration, depending on the outside temperature and travel duration.
- If your horse is reluctant to drink at competitions, take something appetising to tempt him, eg apple juice, mints or an apple cut into pieces to put in the water.
- If you know your horse will not drink at the competition, take soaked hay or haylage with you, as this can help to provide some water to your horse until you get home. You could also offer a sloppy feed, making sure that your horse has recovered from exercise first.
- Get advice on the appropriate use of electrolytes.
- Monitor your horse following the competition, watching out for lethargy, poor performance and dark yellow urine – these are all signs of dehydration.

Dehydration should be avoided at all costs, and it can be prevented. Putting steps in place to avoid dehydration will ensure that you and your horse can enjoy competing, while staying healthy and hydrated at the same time.