MARYLAND
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND / COLLEGE PARK • EASTERN SHORE

Dr. Amy Burk • 301-405-8337 • amyburk@umd.edu
Erin Petersen • 301-405-4690 • petersdr@umd.edu

EXTENSION HAPPENINGS

- March 10 – **Maryland 4-H State Horse Bowl Contest**, College Park
- March 29 – **Equine Session, Mid Atlantic Nutrition Conference**, Timonium

Ask the Experts

Q My horse has been eating dirt when he's turned out in his field. Should I be concerned about a nutritional deficiency?

A It is believed that horses lick or bite at dirt out of boredom and/or because they have a low mineral balance. Eating dirt is a reason to be concerned because it can increase your horse's risk for colic and it could mean his nutrition is not up to par.

Without knowing what you are feeding your horse, I can't say whether it's nutritionally related or not. Assuming it might be nutritional, here are some tips that should improve your horse's mineral balance and stop him from eating dirt:

- Feed a good quality hay whenever the amount of pasture is limited, like during the winter. Most people feed a grass hay like timothy or orchard grass, but you may want to buy a mixed grass/alfalfa hay during the winter. The alfalfa will be higher than the grass in nutrients and will increase the amount of minerals the horse is consuming without having to increase the amount of hay fed. Your horse should receive at least 1.5% of his body weight in hay each day (about 16.5 lbs for an average 1,100 lb horse).
- Hay can be low in some minerals, including copper, zinc, and sodium -- so you may need to feed grain or a vitamin and mineral supplement to your horse, especially if he's in work. Make sure to keep a trace mineral block available for your horse at all times. Commercial grains are usually designed so that if you're feeding at least four pounds of grain a day plus a good amount of hay, the average horse will be meeting its nutritional requirements. Make sure to follow the manufacturer's feeding guidelines on the feed tag.
- Another option is to increase the amount of minerals the horse is consuming by offering him a vitamin and mineral supplement or a commercially available forage balancer pellet that is low in energy but high in vitamins, minerals, and protein. Forage balancers are a great option for horses that are overweight and can't be fed additional hay or grain. It's hard to determine which mineral could be lacking in the diet, but providing a vitamin and mineral supplement along with good quality forage will usually take care of the problem.

If the horse is eating dirt out of boredom, you can try increasing the forage to give the horse something to nibble on, increasing exercise, or try giving your horse a pasture mate to increase his playtime. If the problem continues, you can contact "the experts" directly or consult your veterinarian.

Q My horse gets dehydrated in the winter. What can I do to prevent that from happening?

A A lot of horses get dehydrated during the winter because they cannot drink water that has a frozen layer of ice on top of it, or they do not like to consume freezing cold water. Remember not only to break the ice that forms on the top of the water container so that your horse can drink, but also to use a water heater to keep the water at a drinkable temperature. Water should be maintained at a temperature between 40-45F. You can purchase heaters for water troughs that either float on top of the water or fit into the tank.

Also, you can buy water buckets that have heaters in the bottom of them to prevent the water from freezing. If you use these types of heaters, make sure that the heaters are not shorting out and shocking your horse through the water, causing them not to drink. Also, keep a close eye on your horses to make sure they are not chewing on the electric cables. If electric isn't available, you can try a floating soccer ball or basketball to prevent ice formation or to give the horse something to push on to break the ice. In addition, a solar powered bubbler might help keep the water circulating in one area, creating a small hole in the ice through which your horse can fit its nose.

Some other tips include insulating the sides of the water troughs, placing a cover on two-thirds of the top of the water tank to help with insulation, and placing it in an area that gets the most sun during the day. Also, make sure to keep your water troughs and buckets clean, which usually means cleaning out the frozen dirt and hay that accumulates on the top and bottom.

Keeping an eye on the amount of water your horse drinks is just as important in the winter as it is in the summer. A good rule of thumb is that your horse needs one gallon of water for every 100 pounds of body weight, or about 11 gallons of water per day for the average 1,100-pound horse. Make sure to check the amount of water your horse is consuming twice daily and refill as needed.

Amy Burk, PhD
Extension Horse Specialist
University of Maryland
www.equinestudies.umd.edu

509992-070207