



The Rugging Dilemma

Are we killing them with kindness?

By Jane Clothier - Balanced Horse



Living in a region of highly variable weather, horse owners are constantly faced with the rugging dilemma. Should you rug to keep the horse warm at night and to protect against torrential rain, when there is such a high risk of overheating during the day?

There are various reasons for rugging. The horse that loses too much heat will lose weight and condition. Unrugged horses are susceptible to the dreaded rainscald. Clipped horses in higher levels of work have too little protection from cold and rain. Show horses' appearance needs preserving. And so it goes on.

Another view is that horses are naturally equipped to deal with the Australian climate, given adequate nutrition and paddock shelter. So, what are we actually looking at here?

The horses' thermoregulatory system is designed to maintain the core body temperature at an optimum level. With a skin temperature of around 30°C, it starts to lose heat whenever the air temperature is cooler. This is not an immediate problem, as the horse can conserve heat by seeking shelter or huddling with others, tail to the wind or rain. If the outside temperature grows a lot cooler, the horse may shiver, generating more warmth through muscular activity. Sometimes groups will run, for the same reason.

Other physiological responses include narrowing blood vessels to reduce blood flow to the lower legs, ears and muzzle. Pilo-erection is when the coat rises, allowing warm air to be trapped amongst the hair, serving as insulation.

This is why relentlessly rugging horses can create problems as well as solve them. If the coat is flattened by a rug, the hair cannot lift. Constant rugging can even prevent pilo-erection altogether, as the muscle fibres around the hair follicles become weakened.

During the daytime heat, the rugged horse can sweat in an attempt to bring the overheating core temperature down to a normal level. However, the sweat cannot evaporate. Instead, it either soaks into the rug or becomes trapped beneath it in the horses' coat. The hair is flat, wet and unable to dry, leading to itchy, flaky skin conditions. Worse, prolonged overheating can lead to cell damage, lethargy and, over time, illness.

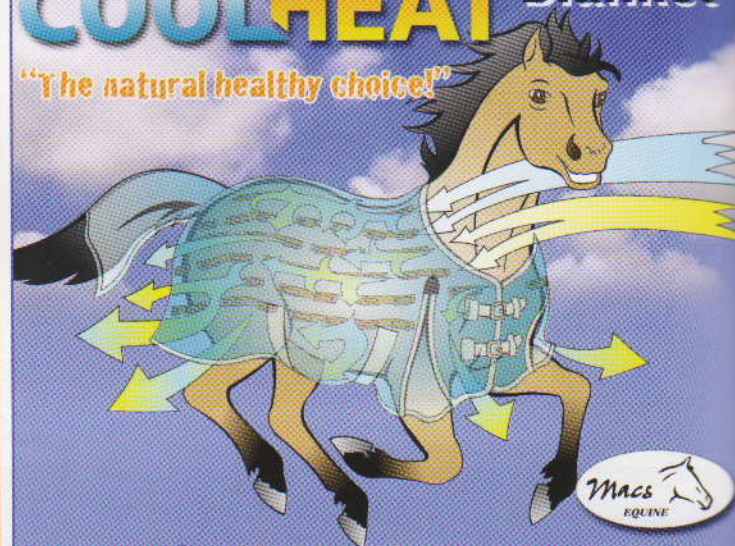
New rugs are coming onto the market that address these issues. The 'Cool Heat' horse blanket from Macs Equine is raised almost half an inch from the surface of the horses' body, allowing the hair to lift and function as nature intended it to. If the horse sweats, the moisture can wick along the hairs, which part to allow air circulation, and dry unimpeded.

Whichever kind of rug you use, the most important thing is to monitor your horse's temperature. When you place your hand beneath the rug, the horse should not feel toasty and warm. Instead, the coat should only just be warm and even bordering on cool. If it is too warm, or your horse is sweating with only light movement, then it shouldn't be rugged at all.

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