

Horses in Transit

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The world of the competition or breeding horse is truly a small place these days as many are transported all over the globe to compete, race, breed or sell. Many studs are involved in dual hemisphere breeding operations and travelling horses by road, sea and air is now commonplace. Even shorter journeys can take their toll!

It goes without saying, that horses should be in good health prior to travel as the stress and sometimes the conditions experienced on the journey, may suppress the immune system resulting in ill health on or soon after arrival.

Travelling is obviously not a normal occupation for horses and this can place enormous stress particularly on the first time traveller. Being removed from their familiar environment, confined for many hours and surrounded by unusual noises and vibrations can create extreme levels of anxiety in some horses. Appropriate management and meeting the horse's needs for water and food wherever possible will help reduce the risk of stress related problems.

It is important that horses arrive in good condition, particularly those due to compete or mares travelling to be covered. Horses should not be deprived of food and water for prolonged periods and every attempt should be made to ensure that as many nutritional needs as possible are met whilst on the road.

Water is the most important nutrient as many horses rapidly become dehydrated. A 500kg horse will need roughly 5-6 gallons of water daily and a lactating mare will need as much as fifty per cent more!

Horses eating forage such as hay, haylage or alfalfa/hay chaffs will need additional water due to the water holding capacity of fibre in the hindgut. Many travelling horses often sweat profusely and these fluid losses must be replaced.

Dehydration results in reduced output from the heart, reduced plasma volume, slower nutrient exchange and waste removal all of which will have adverse effects on the horse's health. So, although an unlimited water supply is very difficult to achieve in practice, water should be offered regularly at least every four hours.

For horses travelling to competitions, it is unwise to restrict water intake on the day of a competition as the effects of dehydration (as listed above) will at the very least not help them perform any better!

Clean, fresh water with a temperature of between 7-24 degrees Celsius is ideal. Some horses will refuse to drink but perseverance is the key. Giving a previously soaked haynet will help and water can be poured onto the haynet at regular intervals. Most horses that refuse to drink will usually rapidly rehydrate themselves on arrival, but water should be offered little and often at the end of the journey.

All horses lose weight during transportation. The main factors contributing to this are reduced intake of food and water combined with increased water losses. The amount of weight lost will vary with factors such as distance travelled, amount of feed and water consumed and the environmental temperature. Work in Japan has shown that horses may lose approximately 0.5% of bodyweight per hour climbing to as high as 5% after a 60 hour journey, although this is an extreme situation. However horses often travel for 30 hours plus. Rapid weight loss results in reduced aerobic capacity, not the best start to an important competition. Anaerobic performance and muscular endurance are also reduced.

Weight loss from travelling may take as long as three days to correct itself, this should be taken into account for horses due to compete.

Horses will have a reduced feed intake when travelling compared to home and for journeys of three hours or less, lack of food will not present a problem. For any journey over three hours, extended periods without food will be detrimental. Lack of food combined with dehydration is more likely to result in colic. Horses

can also rapidly become fatigued as they use up energy trying to balance themselves.

Hay or haylage nets should be given throughout the journey, even for relatively short trips. Horses may also be offered small feeds of chaff such as Gain Cool Chaff, a vitamin/mineral supplement and soaked, very wet beet pulp i.e. a wet mash. Alternatively a soaked mash of palatable low starch cubes (such as Gain Easy Go cubes may be fed. For racing/breeding horses, Gain Freedom is preferred as it is a more nutrient dense, low starch feed. This may be fed with Gain cool chaff and soaked beet pulp to form a mash.

The feeding of fibre even in small quantities will help support gastric health. The practice of withholding feed on the day of a competition or race and particularly fibre may increase the risk of acidic damage to the stomach lining or mucosa. A handful of alfalfa chaff will not affect the performance in fact it may help.

On arrival at their destination, when horses have cooled down the usual hard feed can be fed. Electrolytes should be given to replace lost salts from sweating and this includes breeding mares.

Transporting horses long distance is certainly stressful and a time when appropriate supplementation may be beneficial. Of weanlings that were transported from the same stud for 36 hours under identical conditions those that were given vitamin C and E for 5 days following arrival, mostly remained healthy (no evidence of shipping fever). However 80% of the unsupplemented group developed classic shipping fever symptoms. Researchers currently recommend 10g vitamin C daily for adult horses and 5g for weanlings only, prior to and during travel and then supplementation should be finished.

Attention to detail will help to reduce the stress experienced by many horses whilst traveling long distances. Weight loss and dehydration can be reduced and horses due to compete can arrive in better condition if their nutrient needs are met during the journey. The practice of withholding water and food on a

competition or race day is detrimental particularly for horses traveling substantial distances to the competition.