

Monitoring grazing horses

During the grazing season, it is essential to monitor grazing horses on a daily basis. Although the available grass may allow for a certain nutritional autonomy, it is necessary to take the time to go around the animals and the facilities to check their state of health and ensure that the animals are kept safe in the space provided.

It is not a matter of looking “over the fence” and counting the animals, but of going to observe each individual closely and checking the facilities and equipment.

by **Pauline DOLIGEZ** | 11.07.2016 |

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Technical level   



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The health condition of horses

Behaviour

Normal situation

The horses are alert, live in groups, feed regularly and come to meet humans.

Abnormal situation

A horse away from the others, a horse that does not feed or for example remains lying down when humans approach.

Body condition

- A body condition score greater than 4 (on a scale of 0 to 5) indicates excessive weight. The horse will then have to be restricted because the risk of laminitis is increased. The horse will have to be restricted to a bare paddock.
- Conversely, a status score below 2 should alert to a health problem or difficulty accessing food.

Daily monitoring does not make it any easier to make an objective estimate of the overweight status of animals that you are familiar with. An external opinion (someone who does not see these animals every day) can be useful for assessing their body condition more objectively.

Close inspection

Check the animal from head to tail:

- Eyes: puffy, closed, red or runny eyes...
- The head
- The limbs: swelling, cracks, wounds...
- Hindquarters: staining in the perineal area
- Whole body: signs of scratching, parasites

The horse should also be observed in motion to check for the absence of lameness.

Condition and consistency of dung

Abnormal appearance of the droppings (diarrhoea, presence of parasites, blood, mucus ...) should raise concern, as well as the presence of foreign bodies (acorn husks ...).

Feet

The condition of the feet should be checked (cracks, seedy toe, overgrowth) by lifting them periodically.

Special monitoring

Brood mare

It is important to check for the absence of colic and vulvar discharge. The presence of milk, the condition of the udder (cracks, mastitis) and suckling must be monitored on a daily basis in a mare with foal.

Foals less than 6 months old

Signs of dejection, absence of suckling, prolonged lying down even when humans are approaching should be seen as a warning sign. Do not hesitate to take the temperature of these particularly sensitive animals. It is recommended to check young foals twice a day.

Old horses

The most important things to watch out for in older horses are the ability to move around and to feed properly. Their body condition should be carefully monitored in order to avoid excessive weight loss.

Horse equipment



Fly masks will need to be adjusted
© P. Doligez

As far as possible, horses should not be left haltered to avoid accidents due to snagging (trees, fences, ...) or getting their feet trapped. If halters are indispensable, they should be well adjusted without injury. Also remember to regularly readjust the halters of foals because their heads get bigger...

Generally speaking, horses should not be shod in the field, particularly on their hind legs (risks of accidents due to kicking), except in the case of illness. Lost shoes are also a source of accidents in the meadow... and looking for them is a very tedious task!

Fly masks are only effective if they fit properly. If they have holes in them, this can be dangerous when insects get inside.

Condition of the facilities and equipment in the field

Fences

Checking the fences, barriers and the condition of the shelter will help prevent injury and/or animals from escaping.

It is important to check that the electric current is running on the electric wires (two or three rows). Horses are easily attracted by the grass on the other side of the fence and will quickly find the spot where there is no current flowing! Test the fence either with a current tester or simply by touching the wire with a blade of grass. Tall grass under the fence or poorly trimmed hedges can reduce the flow of current.

Water



Empty and dirty water bucket © P. Doligez

Horses can drink **up to 60 litres of water per day**. The operation of the automatic drinkers should be checked. Water buckets must always contain a sufficient quantity of water for all the horses present (even if it rains).

In hot weather and/or when hay is distributed as a supplement, the consumption of water can increase substantially.

It is important to clean the water bucket regularly to limit the formation of algae and the absence of foreign bodies (birds, dead rodents...).

Finally, even if a natural water point is accessible in the plot (pond, stream), the water stations are safer (intoxication with dirty water, risk of old horses drowning, etc.).

Salt stone

It is recommended to install a self-service salt stone. It is preferable to hang it rather than leave it on the ground where it will be soiled and neglected.

State of the pasture

Assess the availability of grass by zigzagging through the parcel. On average, you should avoid grass from getting below 5cm in height. Overgrazing will have to be limited if you want the grass to regrow and be productive after the summer period.

If the grass runs out, it will be necessary to supply forage to the field. If possible, the surface area should be restricted when providing additional forage, to allow the remainder of the pasture to rest.

When the amount of grass decreases, horses tend to attack trees (bark) or even fences and consume plants which may be toxic. Care should be taken to limit access to toxic trees in natural hedgerows (yew) and check the absence of various toxic plants (e.g. ragwort) when grass surfaces are very bare.

Equipment and tools to use during the monitoring visit

For horse care

- A halter
- First aid kit (thermometer, disinfectant)
- If possible, have a restricted area where the horse can be treated without injury

To repair a fence

- Fence wire
- A repair connector
- Insulators
- Spare stakes
- A knife...

About our writers

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