

Horses and Rain

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Spring is a very rainy season in Kentucky. With a lot of rain comes a lot of mud, and in some places, floods. If you own horses, you need to be aware of some problems that arise when you have too much rain in a short period of time.

Wet pastures are ruined by horses' hooves, so it is very possible that you will have more weeds than grass when the rain stops. If you have an overcrowded field, your pastures will probably be ruined, and you may need to feed your horses hay year-round. Also, without the competition of lush grass, you may end up with some poisonous plants in your pasture, and since horses are browsers, when they don't have a lot of grass to eat they may start eating the those plants.

Horses that like to "horse around" run and slip and risk bowing a tendon, popping a splint, or even falling down and hurting themselves. Of course, these injuries can occur at any time, but when the ground is slippery, the chances for these injuries increase. Slippery slopes and horses, especially young and rambunctious horses, are never a good combination.

Here are some tips to help keep your horses safe during rainy springs and other rainy periods:

Place gates, waterers, feeders, and shelters in the higher areas of the field or paddock.

Doing so is good facility design so that you have less chance of mud in these areas. (For more information about mud, see the Cooperative Extension publication [High Traffic Area Pads for Horses](#) (ID-164). When fields are soft and muddy, the chance for erosion increases if you don't restrict your horses' access.

Consider setting up a sacrifice lot for turning out your horses and keeping your pastures intact to help during long, heavy periods of rain. How large this lot should be depends on how many acres you have per horse and your land's topography. Ideally, you would have 2-3 acres per



horse for this lot, and it would not be in a flooding zone. Before designating this lot, contact your county extension agent to take a look at the land you're planning to use so he/she can verify whether any poisonous plants are present.

Make sure that you groom your horses often to allow air to penetrate the coat and dry the skin in order to prevent skin diseases such as rain rot, dew poisoning, and other fungal diseases that may have a higher incidence during rainy weather. Have shelters available, or bring the horses in for part of the day so they can dry off and you can groom them. As you groom, you will be able to notice any signs of skin diseases.

Keep vaccinations up to date, because a lot of rain and standing water will increase the incidence of mosquito-borne diseases, which include the neurological diseases eastern and western equine encephalomyelitis (EEE, WEE) and West Nile virus (WNV). Other diseases transmitted by insects are equine infectious anemia and Potomac horse fever. The

American Association of Equine Practitioners recommends that horses be vaccinated annually for EEE, WEE and WNV (as well as some other diseases). To ensure that your horses will be protected during the mosquito season, the best time of the year to vaccinate against these diseases is in February or March. Consult with your veterinarian to draw up a vaccination schedule for your horses. Also, make sure you dump water from buckets, water troughs, and any other container that can hold rain water, as these are excellent places for mosquito breeding.

Make sure you exterminate rats and mice from your barn and dispose of the carcasses appropriately. Floods will drive rodents out of their habitat and bring them to a drier place: your barn (and your house). A barn, however, is not an appropriate place for rodents to live, as they bring diseases, such as leptospirosis, which can cause blindness as well as abortion in horses. Humans can also contract leptospirosis from infected rodents and other animals. Do not throw rodents' carcasses in the pasture or anywhere near

your horses, as that will attract opossums, which in turn can transmit equine protozoal myelitis, a neurological disease, to your horses.

Clear your pasture of debris if it has been under water. Floods bring out trash, which can be potentially dangerous to horses. For example, plastic bottles, bailing twine, pieces of cloth, etc., have been

found in pastures that have been flooded. Floods also wash out agrottoxics to creeks and water beds, also dangerous.

Remove rotten hay and vegetation so horses will not eat them, because floods can rot them. If horses eat the rotten and moldy hay, they are at risk of becoming infected with botulism, which can be fatal.

Rain is important for agriculture. However, during long rainy periods, horse owners need to be aware of possible complications. For information about emergency preparedness and how to respond in cases of floods, tornadoes, and other emergencies, check out the Cooperative Extension publication *Equine Emergency and Disaster Preparedness* (ID-173).