

Dear Dr. Wise: My neighbor has horses and they live outside and sleep outside all year round. Shouldn't they be in a barn in the very hot and the very cold weather?

I can understand your concern about your neighbor's horses being outside. After all, we would be quite miserable without central heating and air conditioning. Horses have a few rather efficient ways of regulating their body temperature. Horses use their hair coat, fat under their skin, sweating and basic behavioral habits to stay comfortable.

A comfortable temperature range for horses is 18-59 degrees Fahrenheit. In the late fall, horses grow extremely thick winter hair, that stands up when it gets cold and traps air next to the skin. This is the exact same idea as adding layers of clothing. The hair coat is also a barrier to ice and keeps their skin dry.

You may have noticed her horses standing with their rear ends to the wind in snow storms, this helps protect the areas of their body without much hair from cold damage. The fat under horses' skin acts as an insulator to heat loss much like an insulated mug for your morning coffee. They may crowd together to keep each other warm, so individual horses in a pasture may struggle to keep warm on very cold days.

As long as horses have some sort of shelter from the wind, ice and rain, keeping warm should not be a problem. One other consideration is that the horses have free access to unfrozen water and plenty of feed as their need for energy is greatly increased in the winter.

Horses are not as tolerant of hot weather. They can sweat quite effectively which helps to cool the body. Overweight horses struggle more with keeping cool as their body fat is acting as an insulation. Barns on very hot days are often hotter than it is outside. Not all barns have a good breeze inside to keep air moving, so putting a horse in a barn may make them more uncomfortable.

As long as the horses have some shade from the sun and fresh water at all times, being out on hot days should not be a problem for them.

I hope that I helped answer your question. If you have other concerns about the welfare of the animals and do not think they are being taken care of humanely it is best to contact a local veterinarian and address your concerns with them. They can help you take the right steps to solving your problem.