



# ASK THE VET

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hay steamers

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## Drought and Horses

The historical drought in the southwest—the driest 10-month period on record for Texas alone—has been a frequent topic in the news recently. It is very important to understand how drought conditions can affect your horse, and what measures you can take to prevent any health problems that may result from those conditions.

Of the six basic nutrients that are essential for life\*, water is the most important because it facilitates vital life functions, including circulation of the blood, digestion, cooling and maintaining overall cell health and chemical balance. Lack of water can lead to dehydration, a serious and potentially life-threatening condition.



It is important to understand that dehydration cannot be detected with physical examination until there is a 5% body water loss; however, a horse's physical performance is decreased far before that 5% mark is hit. Since this level of dehydration is undetectable by physical exam, it is especially important for your horse to always have access to fresh and clean free choice water. In drought conditions, this is obviously a difficult task, so whatever water you can provide to your horses should be as clean as possible. Palatability is important for horses and can deter them from drinking all that they need.

If your horse is not getting adequate water intake, you may first notice a decrease in his dry matter intake (hay). As dehydration worsens, the horse will begin to decrease his physical activity, and as the severity increases you will see physical signs such as dry mucous membranes (gums) and sunken eyes. Inadequate water intake is also believed to increase the risk of impaction colic and possibly choke as well. If total body water loss is great enough, there isn't enough moisture from saliva to swallow, resulting in choke, or enough fluid in the gut to move along ingesta, which will lead to colic.

For both of these situations, steaming hay is a logical solution. Steaming actually helps replenish moisture in the hay, meaning it can help reduce the amount of saliva needed to safely swallow the food. Additionally, the more moisture there is in the hay, the better it allows the ingesta to continue safely through the GI tract.

We have found steaming hay important for so many different situations, but maybe no more important than helping to hydrate your horse, especially when water sources and forage quality is low. Remember that drought not only directly affects your water source, but also affects the water necessary to produce the forage that your horse needs. Harvesting and curing hay are very dependent on the weather, and without adequate water the palatability and nutrient quality of the hay significantly decreases.

This is another advantage of steaming hay during a drought situation. The palatability of forage is often decreased during drought, and more money has to be spent importing hay from other places. These increases in costs can be very damaging to a horse business, especially when coupled with the potential loss of performance from the dehydrated horse. Our hope is that something as simple as steaming hay can not only help maintain the health of your horse, but in a small way help protect the health of the horse industry itself.

-- **Stephanie Davis, DVM**

\*The six essential nutrients are water, protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins and minerals.

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