Cold temperatures and snow covered ground can lead to hoof and mouth related problems for horses, especially older animals that may already have less than ideal soundness of teeth, feet and legs. Colder weather requires greater energy intake by horses. However most of the extra feed intake should be in the form of forage in order to help horses stay warm through heat of digestion of fiber. Sedentary horses should be provided with 1.5 - 2.0 percent of body weight per day of good quality hay, and active horses or “hard keepers” may need additional grain supplementation, depending on body condition. However, horses will not be able to efficiently use such large quantities of dry feed without sound teeth. Horses often experience uneven wear on their premolar and molar teeth, which require “floating” (filing) of the sharp points called “hooks” that eventually appear on the edges of the cheek teeth.

Some horses with poor teeth may be able to maintain good body condition during warm weather when they can graze forages that are tender and contain natural water. These same horses, though, may lose weight when their poor teeth become inadequate to grind dry forages over the winter months, so they don't get all the energy value they should from their diet. Unfortunately, weight loss may not be detected for extended periods of time during cold weather because horses may appear robust while in their thick winter coats even when they have become quite thin. Horses should be examined “hands-on” every few days in the winter to be sure that they are maintaining adequate body condition such that the ribs cannot be easily felt with only light pressure on the horse’s ribcage. Horses that have obviously sharp hooks on the outside edges of the upper cheek teeth should be treated by a trained Veterinarian or Equine Dentist working with a Veterinarian. Other teeth problems, such as missing teeth, loose teeth, hooks on the lower inside edges of check teeth, “waves” in the dental arcade, etc. are more difficult to detect by the horse owner, so routine veterinary inspection of a horse’s teeth should be done twice per year.

Ice and snow accumulation, and freezing/thawing ground can cause feet and leg unsoundness in horses. Even though horses’ hooves do tend to grow slower during the winter months, the growth does not stop altogether, and continued farrier appointments should be kept every eight weeks or so. Hoof injuries from hard, frozen uneven ground or from excess pressure on the sole from accumulated ice balls in the feet can be debilitating. Bruising of the sole from frozen ground that was made rough from high horse traffic such as occurs in many paddocks and turn-outs can lead to foot abscesses that require veterinary treatment. When uneven muddy ground suddenly freezes, horses should be kept off of it until it thaws.
It is generally a good idea to remove the shoes from horses that are turned out in paddocks or pastures during the winter while maintaining normal hoof wall length and angle through regular trimming. However, those hardy horse owners that continue to ride outdoors in the winter time may logically choose to keep shoes on their horses throughout the winter in order to avoid excess wear on those slower-growing hooves. In this case, horses’ feet should be inspected frequently to be sure that shoes are not thrown, pulled off or sprung in the constantly changing ground that may be wet and gooey one day and rock hard, slick and treacherous the next. Additionally, when there is snow cover on the ground, horses wearing shoes are much more prone to accumulating ice balls in the soles of their feet. The warmth from the sole of the horse’s foot partially melts some snow which re-freezes and then the inside rims of horse shoes hold this material tightly in place. Horses with such accumulated ice in their feet are susceptible to sole bruising, abscesses, foot discomfort, strained tendons and ligaments, compromised balance, injuries from falls, etc.

If a horse must remain shod and housed outdoors during an extended period of snow cover, it is a good idea to have specially designed pads placed between the horse’s hoof and the horse shoe. Treating the bottom of the horse’s foot with petroleum jelly or some types of grease may help for a while, but this tends to work only for a short time. Your horse shoer will be able to help you choose from a few different types of pads that encourage the ice to fall out of the sole of the horse’s foot. Options for shoe pads might include full pads made of plastic, rubber or leather, which may or may not include a bubble shaped device in the center, or tubular rim pads that expand with the horses shifting weight and encourage the ice accumulation to pop out. There are advantages and disadvantages to each type of pad that the horse owner and farrier should discuss. If the weather forecast calls for extended periods of ice and snow, and a horse will be wearing shoes outdoors, then traction devices such as heel and/or toe calks or studs, or borium welds can be added to the shoes based upon your farrier’s recommendation.

Modern horses encounter seasonal problems that are related more to confined management conditions rather than from inherent weakness of the horse. Horse owners must realize that our horses need extra attention to cope with conditions that we have imposed on them, like dry preserved feed and long term shoeing, especially during times of environmental stressors such as cold weather, snow and unpredictable footing.