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COLIC

The term “colic” simply means abdominal pain. There are many causes of colic and symptoms range from very mild to violent. Colic remains the number one killer of horses.

What are the symptoms?

A horse with colic will show varying symptoms depending on the cause of the colic, how long it has been present and the pain threshold of the patient. Mild colic symptoms include one or more of the following:

- Dullness
- Off the food
- Turning to look at the flank/ biting flank
- Curling up of the top lip
- Grinding teeth
- Adopting a ‘straining to urinate’ stance
- Lying down (especially a horse that doesn’t usually)
- Pawing the ground

Severe colic pain can progress to more vigorous pawing as well as violent rolling or thrashing.



Horse rolling with abdominal pain i.e. colic

What causes colic?

Colic can be due to something as simple as a gut ‘spasm’ resulting from a change in feed or water or a change in feeding routine like when humans feel indigestion.

The most common cause of colic in this region however, is blockage of the large intestine due to sand, termed a ‘sand impaction.’ Feed can also cause an impaction, particularly if the horse is unable to chew food properly due to infrequent dentistry.

Gut parasites can also cause colic, and swelling and twisting of the intestines themselves. Horses with impaction colic can secondarily twist their intestines from rolling too much.

How is colic treated?

Different types of colic require different treatments, so an accurate diagnosis is the first step. Simple large colon impactions usually respond to treatment by drenching with oil and water via stomach tube and by giving pain relief.

Some cases however, require more urgent aggressive treatment with many drugs and sedatives. Some cases can only be treated surgically.

What should I do if my horse has colic?

If you think your horse has colic, call your veterinarian immediately and explain the symptoms. Colic is an emergency and the sooner intervened the greater the likelihood of a good outcome. Take the feed away and take note of how many piles of faeces have been produced recently. If the horse is trying to roll, it is important to keep them up and walk them around, but make sure you are safe at all times. Remember that the key to success with colic is early diagnosis and treatment.



Intestines of a horse with colic at surgery). The darker intestines have had their blood supply damaged (strangulated).

How can a vet tell what is causing the colic?

The vet will perform a physical exam and if necessary may perform further tests such as rectal examination, taking blood and peritoneal (abdominal) fluid samples and passing a stomach tube to help determine the nature of the colic. It is not always easy to establish the exact problem however the vet will quickly determine whether your horse can be treated medically or if surgical intervention is required. In all cases, the earlier the decision can be made as to whether medical or surgical treatment is needed and that treatment is begun, the better the horse's chance of survival.



Redworm larvae at the root of intestinal arteries – also can cause colic.

Can I prevent my horse from getting colic?

To a certain extent – Yes, you can prevent colic. It is extremely important to stick to a regular feeding routine, and make changes to the type of feed gradually over at least 2 weeks. Horses should be fed high quality hay and chaff free of mould and vermin etc and should have regular professional dental care to ensure that feed is able to be chewed properly. Regular worming is also important.

In sandy areas horses should be discouraged from eating off the ground by using feed bins or rubber matting to prevent excessive sand ingestion. In addition, regular supplementation of psyllium husks to meals can help to shift sand out of the intestines.

Psyllium husks can be given as a preventative but should not be given when a horse is showing symptoms of colic.

Ongoing prevention at home can be done with 1 gram per kilogram of psyllium husks fed once a day for 5-10 days each month (do not feed it for longer than 10 days in a row otherwise it doesn't work).