



Colic Fact Sheet

Colic is the number one killer of horses, however, it is not a disease but rather a combination of signs that alert us to abdominal pain in the horse (remember that abdominal pain can include a problem with the intestines, but also may indicate a problem in the urinary tract, reproductive tract, etc). Colic can range from mild to severe, but it should never be ignored. That's because many of the conditions that cause colic can become life-threatening in a relatively short period of time. Only by quickly and accurately recognizing colic, and seeking qualified veterinary help, can the chance for recovery be maximized.

Recognizing colic

Signs can vary greatly with colic, due to the severity of the colic and the individual horse's response to that pain. Although there are many signs of colic, we have listed the more common signs below:

- Turning the head towards the flank
- Pawing
- Kicking or biting at the abdomen
- Stretching out as if to urinate without doing so
- Repeatedly lying down and getting up or attempting to do so
- Rolling, especially violent rolling
- Sitting up in a dog-like position, or lying on their back
- Lack of appetite (anorexia)

- Putting head down to water without drinking
- Lack of bowel movements, as evidence by the small number of manure piles
- Absence of, or reduced, digestive sounds
- Sweating
- Rapid respiration and/or flared nostrils
- Elevated pulse great (greater than 55 beats per minute)
- Depression
- Cool extremities

Taking immediate action

Time is perhaps the most critical factor if colic is to be successfully treated. While a number of cases resolve without medical intervention, a significant percentage do require prompt medical care, including emergency surgery. If you suspect your horse is suffering from colic, the following action plan is suggested:

- Remove all food and water
- Notify the veterinary clinic immediately
- Be prepared to provide as much of the following information as possible
 - Pulse rate
 - Respiratory rate (breathing)
 - Rectal temperature
 - Color of mucous membranes
 - Capillary refill time (test by pressing on the gums next to the teeth, releasing, then counting the seconds it takes for color to return)
 - Behavioral signs, such as pawing, kicking, rolling, depression, etc.
 - Digestive noises, or lack of them
 - Bowel movements, including color, consistency and frequency
 - Any recent changes in management, feeding or exercise
 - Medical history, including deworming and any past episodes of abdominal pain
 - Breeding history and pregnancy status if the patient is a mare, and recent breeding history if the patient is a stallion

- Keep horse as calm and comfortable as possible.
- If the horse is rolling or behaving violently, attempt to walk the horse slowly.
- Do not administer drugs unless specifically directed to do so by your equine practitioner. Drugs may camouflage problems and interfere with accurate diagnosis.
- Follow your veterinarian's advice exactly and await his or her arrival.

Diagnosing the cause

Your equine practitioner will establish the severity of colic and identify its cause.

His or her examination and/or treatment may include the following procedures:

- Observation of such signs such as sweating, abdominal distention (bloating), rapid breathing, flared nostrils and abnormal behavior
- Obtaining an accurate history
- Passage of a stomach tube to determine presence of excess gas, fluids and ingesta
- Monitoring vital signs, including temperature, pulse, respiration, color of mucous membranes and capillary refill time
- Rectal palpation for evidence of intestinal blockage, distention or other abnormalities
- Blood test for white blood cell count and other data
- Abdominal tap in order to evaluate protein level and cell type in peritoneal fluid
- Analgesics or sedatives to relieve pain and distress
- Laxatives to help reestablish normal intestinal function
- Continued observation to determine response to treatment

Classifying colic

The exact steps your veterinarian will follow will depend on his or her findings.

For example, some colics can only be resolved through surgery. Even though there are myriad causes, most colics fall into one of three groups:

- I. Intestinal Dysfunction. This is the most common category and simply means that the horse's bowels are not working properly. It includes such things as gas distention, impaction, spasms and paralysis.
- II. Intestinal Accidents. These occur less frequently, and include displacements, torsions, and hernias, whereby sections of the intestine become trapped or pinched in body cavities. Some horses seem anatomically predisposed to such problems. Intestinal accidents almost always require emergency surgery.
- III. Enteritis or Ulcerations. These are colics related to inflammation, infections and lesions within the digestive tract. They can be caused by numerous factors, including stress, disease, salmonellosis and parasites

Preventing Colic

While horses seem predisposed to colic due to the anatomy and function of their digestive tracts, management can play a key role in prevention. Although not every case is avoidable, the following guidelines can maximize the horse's health and reduce the risk of colic:

- Establish a set routine – including feeding and exercise schedules – and stick to it.
- Feed a high quality diet comprised primarily of roughage.
- Avoid feeding excessive grain and energy-dense supplements (at least half the horse's energy requirements should be supplied through hay or forage. A better guide is that twice as much energy should be supplied from roughage source than from concentrates.)
- Divide daily concentrate rations into two or more smaller feedings rather than one large one to avoid overloading the horse's digestive tract. Hay is best fed free-choice before offering concentrates.
- Set up a regular parasite control program with the help of your equine practitioner. Utilize fecal samples to determine its effectiveness.
- Provide exercise and/or turnout on a daily basis.
- Change the intensity/duration of an exercise regimen gradually.

- Provide fresh, clean water at all times (The only exception is when the horse is excessively hot. Then it should be given small sips of lukewarm water until it has recovered.)
- Avoid medications unless they are prescribed by your equine practitioner, especially pain-relief drugs (analgesics), which can cause ulcers.
- Check hay, bedding, pasture and environment for potentially toxic substances, such as blister beetles, noxious weeds and other indigestible foreign matter.
- Avoid putting feed on the ground, especially in sandy soils.
- Make dietary and other management changes as gradually as possible.
- Reduce stress. Horses experiencing changes in environment or workloads are at high risk of intestinal dysfunction.
- Pay special attention to animals when transporting them or changing their surroundings, such as at shows.
- Observe foaling mares pre- and post-partum for any signs of colic. Also watch carefully any horses who have had a previous bout with colic (they may be at greater risk).
- Maintain accurate records of management, feeding practices and health.

Summary

Virtually any horse is susceptible to colic. Age, sex and breed differences in susceptibility seems to be relatively minor. We offer guidance and assistance to help your horse maintain gastrointestinal health. The most useful weapons are yearly exams and proper deworming and fecal testing with strategic deworming with the use of our equine rotational dewormer packs. Please contact the office to set up an appointment and for more information.

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