

Colic - a serious belly ache



Colic is a word that every horse owner dreads. Unfortunately, most horses will suffer from colic at some point and it is essential for you to know how to identify the symptoms and what to do next. Although the majority of colic cases resolve with minimal help, getting veterinary attention at the right moment can mean the difference between life and death for your horse.

What is colic?

Colic is not a disease but is a word used to describe signs that indicate pain in the belly (or abdomen) in the horse.

How do I know my horse has colic?

Signs of mild colic

- Pawing or scraping the ground.
- Turning the head to look at the abdomen ('flank watching').
- Kicking or biting at the abdomen.
- Stretching out as if needing to urinate.
- Restlessness - getting up and down frequently

If the bout of colic progresses, the symptoms your horse shows will worsen.

Signs of severe colic

- Sweating.
- Rolling.
- Sitting down like a dog.
- Lying on its back.
- Inability to stand.
- Rapid respiration rate (sometimes with flared nostrils; normal rate = 8-20 breaths per minute).
- Elevated pulse rate (more than 52 beats per minute).
- Red colouration of gums and eyes.

What causes colic?

There are many possible causes of colic and often it is impossible to determine the exact cause. Rather surprisingly, the anatomy of the horse's digestive system (gut) is rather poorly designed for its job and therefore colic is quite a common problem. It can be brought on by changes in management such as:

- Change in diet.
- Changes in stabling and/or bedding.
- Change in exercise level.

Certain physical conditions can predispose horses to colic, for example, a heavy intestinal worm burden, teeth problems and scrotal hernias in colts.

What should I do if I think my horse has colic?

While some cases resolve with simple care and management by the owner, others require veterinary attention and possibly surgery. Unfortunately, a small number of horses with colic do not recover. The success of surgical treatment is heavily dependent on the length of time between the first signs of colic and veterinary intervention. Any unnecessary delay will greatly reduce the chances of recovery. It is therefore essential to recognise when veterinary attention is needed.

If your horse is only showing signs of mild colic:

- Remove hay and feed (not water) and monitor closely. It is worth taking a temperature, pulse and respiration every 30 minutes and keeping a record of these.
- It may be helpful to walk your horse slowly for 5 minutes every half-hour as the exercise will encourage gut function and help keep your horse relaxed.
- Check the stable for sharp objects that may injure your horse if it rolls and remove them. Add extra

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bedding.

- Traditionally horse owners have been instructed to stop a horse with colic from rolling. If the colic is mild and your horse simply wants to lie down and rest this will do it no harm.
- If your horse is becoming more violent and is trying to lie and roll then your vet should be called. At this point walking your horse may help to prevent it rolling. However - it is safer for your horse (and you!) to roll in it's stable than to go down in the yard.
- **Do not administer any drugs, including wormers, unless instructed to do so by your vet. Drugs can mask symptoms and prevent accurate diagnosis.**

If your horse is showing signs of severe colic:

- Contact your vet immediately and describe the signs and duration of the colic.
- **Do not administer any drugs, including wormers, unless instructed to do so by your vet.**
- Do not put yourself at risk of injury if your horse is rolling - stay well back.

What will my vet do?

Your vet will ask about any events leading up to the colic and about the general management of your horse. He/she will want to observe the horse loose in the stable, as some horses do not exhibit signs of pain while being held. They will monitor the horse's vital signs such as temperature, pulse, respiratory rate, etc.

Your vet may sedate your horse at this point to continue with the examination:

- A **stethoscope** on the horse's flank will be used to listen for abnormal gut sounds (NB be quiet while they are doing this!).
- A **stomach tube** may be passed through the nose and down the throat to determine the presence of gas, fluid or food in the stomach. Horses cannot vomit so the release of trapped gas or fluid in this way is very important.
- An **internal examination** (rectal palpation) will be carried out to help identify problems with the intestine (gut). Even though only about 30-40% of the gut can be reached this way, this procedure provides your vet with a lot of information about the possible causes of colic in your horse.
- A **blood sample** may be taken to determine whether your horse is dehydrated.
- A sample of **abdominal fluid** (peritoneal fluid) may be taken by placing a needle into the belly. This is known as 'abdominal paracentesis' or 'abdominocentesis'. Peritoneal fluid lubricates the abdominal cavity and intestines. Normally the liquid is pale yellow and clear, but in colic cases this can change.

These procedures are important to assess the severity of the colic and to decide on the most suitable form of treatment. The examinations are usually well tolerated by horses and will not cause unnecessary discomfort.

What will happen next?

Your vet, using the findings from the examination, will decide on the best treatment for your horse. This may be treatment with drugs or they may advise surgical treatment.

If the colic is mild and your vet recommends drug therapy (medical treatment), you will need to check your horse regularly to ensure that the signs of colic are reducing. Your horse should be picking at hay within 1 hour. If the signs of colic persist, call your vet for advice.

If surgery is the recommended treatment, your horse will need to be transported to a surgical facility which may be some distance away. Your vet may suggest that your horse travels with a stomach tube taped in place to relieve any pressure in the gut. He/she may also give your horse pain-killing drugs for the journey.

How can I prevent my horse from getting colic?

Remember that horses are predisposed to colic because of their abdominal anatomy and the way their gut functions.

Although some colic conditions are unavoidable, there are steps you can take to reduce the chance of your horse developing colic.

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Feed and water

- Provide plenty of clean, fresh water at all times.
- Make dietary changes gradually over a couple of weeks.
- Divide daily feeds into 2 or more smaller rations to avoid overloading the digestive system (horses should be fed little and often).
- Avoid feeding from the ground in areas of sandy soil. Sand can cause colic if eaten accidentally.
- Never allow your horse access to unsoaked sugar beet pulp.

Routine health care

- Ensure that your horse's teeth are checked regularly.
- Follow a regular worming programme recommended by your vet.
- Only give your horse medications and oral treatments after consulting your vet.

Paddocks and stabling

- Keep to a routine - sudden changes in management are a common cause of colic.
- Pick up manure from paddocks regularly (this will help reduce worm infestations).
- Keep paddocks clear of ragwort, fallen tree branches or debris that your horse could accidentally eat.
- Do not overgraze in sandy soils.
- Watch for your horse eating its bedding, especially if it is box rested for a period of time. Straw bedding may need to be changed to shredded paper or shavings.

Exercise

- Have a regular exercise regime and only change intensity on a gradual basis over a couple of weeks.
- Develop a daily routine and try not to change it abruptly - especially when the horse is away from home.
- Reduce stress, resulting from a heavy show season, lengthy travelling, overcrowded paddocks, etc.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your horse please contact Hampden Veterinary Hospital on 01296 423666 and we will be happy to advise you.