

Colic in Horses

Understanding Horse Colic: Prevention and Management

Colic is something every horse owner dreads—it's one of the most common health emergencies for our equine friends. If you ever spot signs of colic in your horse, don't hesitate to call your vet right away.

What is Colic?



So, what exactly is colic? Essentially, it's a term that describes abdominal pain in horses. This discomfort can stem from issues within the gut or other abdominal organs. The symptoms can range from mild to severe, and while colic is a frequent emergency, advancements in treatment have greatly improved outcomes. With prompt detection and effective management, most horses have a good chance of recovery.

While you can't completely eliminate the risk of colic, good management practices can significantly reduce it.

Keep an Eye Out: Signs of Colic

Colic symptoms can vary, often depending on how much pain your horse is in. Along with general behaviour changes, here are some telltale signs to watch for:

- A loss of appetite
- Restlessness and pawing at the ground
- Looking back at their belly or kicking at it
- Difficulty passing droppings

- Gurgling sounds coming from their stomach
- Sweating or an increased breathing rate
- Stretching as if trying to urinate
- Rolling around or lying down
- An elevated pulse rate
- Lethargy or a dull demeanour

Remember, some horses might only show a few of these signs. If you're ever in doubt, it's best to consult your vet.



What Causes Colic?

Colic can arise from various factors, but most issues are linked to the gastrointestinal tract. Here are some common culprits:

- **Digestive Disorders:** Issues like dental problems, worm infestations, or damage from past colic surgeries can lead to colic.
- **Poor Feeding Practices:** Things like feeding dirty food, incorrect portions, inadequate fibre or water, or sudden diet changes can upset your horse's stomach.
- **Stress:** Factors such as intense exercise, travel, or sudden changes in routine can contribute to colic.
- **Pasture Conditions:** Poorly maintained or over-grazed pastures, especially those with sandy soil, increase the risk of colic.

The Effects of Domestication

It's important to remember that horses evolved to graze on a very different diet than what many of them eat today. Domestication has changed how horses eat and how much time they spend eating. Even those that graze on grass consume a very different diet compared to their wild ancestors.

Their digestive systems haven't kept pace with these dietary changes. Horses rely on fermentation to digest food, which produces gas that can easily lead to colic when things go awry. Historically, horses grazed and moved about freely, but nowadays, many are kept stabled for long periods, which can contribute to digestive issues.



Types of Colic

Colic comes in various forms, each with different causes and treatments. Here's a quick overview:

1. **Spasmodic Colic:** This is the most common type, caused by spasms in the gut. It often occurs after sudden changes in diet or stress. You might hear noisy activity in your horse's abdomen. Luckily, it usually responds well to pain relief and antispasmodic medications from your vet.
2. **Gas Colic:** This type results from an excess buildup of gas in the intestines, causing bloating and discomfort. It can happen due to a high-sugar diet or inadequate water intake. If there's no obstruction, it can typically be treated with medications, but severe cases might need surgical intervention.
3. **Impaction Colic:** This occurs when the gut becomes blocked by a mass, like food or partially digested waste. It's often seen in horses with dental issues or those not drinking enough water. Treatment often involves a procedure called nasogastric intubation to help clear the blockage.
4. **Displacement/Entrapment:** This happens when a part of the gut moves to an abnormal position, leading to painful bloating and potential tissue damage. Treatment can involve medications or, in severe cases, surgery.
5. **Torsion:** A very serious form of colic where the colon twists, cutting off blood supply and potentially leading to tissue death. Immediate surgical intervention is critical for survival.

6. **Strangulating Obstruction:** This occurs when a section of the intestine is squeezed tightly, cutting off blood supply and causing tissue to die. Urgent surgery is necessary here.
7. **Sand Colic:** Caused by ingesting sand or dirt, usually from grazing in sandy areas. It can lead to impaction and irritation. Mild cases may be treated medically, while severe cases often require surgery.

What to Do if Your Horse Shows Signs of Colic



Colic is a serious emergency, so always call your vet immediately if you notice any symptoms, even if they seem mild. While you wait for help, here's what you can do:

- Monitor your horse closely, keeping an eye on their pulse, temperature, and breathing.
- Remove feed, hay, and water unless your vet advises otherwise.
- Ensure your horse is in a safe space, free from hazards.
- If they seem anxious but are in a secure area, watch them without getting too involved to avoid injury.
- If symptoms are mild, walking them gently might help.

Keep a note of any unusual behaviours or what they ate before symptoms started.

Treatment for Colic

For mild colic cases, your vet may provide pain relief and relaxants to help get the gut moving again. They might also use nasogastric intubation to deliver fluids and treatments directly to the stomach. Keep an eye on your horse's progress and communicate any changes to your vet.

In more severe situations, where the initial treatments aren't working, surgery may be required, and your horse might need to be transported to an equine hospital.

Preventing Colic in Horses

While you can't prevent all types of colic, there are steps you can take to minimise the risk:

- **Provide Fresh Water:** Ensure your horse always has access to clean, fresh water. Clean water buckets and troughs regularly, and change the water twice a day. In colder weather, ensure the water isn't frozen, and in hot weather, keep it clear of algae.
- **Feed a High-Fibre Diet:** Offer a high-fibre diet, feeding smaller portions frequently throughout the day. This keeps their digestive system functioning well. When changing their diet, do so gradually.
- **Manage Exercise:** Set up a consistent exercise routine, allowing your horse to acclimatise to any changes in activity. Always let them cool down after exercise before feeding.
- **Keep Up with Dental Checks:** Regular dental check-ups can prevent issues that might lead to blockages in the intestine.
- **Monitor Grass Growth:** Be cautious of lush spring grass, as it can act as a dietary change. Consider rationing access to it.
- **Targeted Worming:** Regular worm testing and treatment can prevent worm-related colic. A strategic worming program is essential to avoid internal damage.
- **Stick to a Routine:** Horses thrive on consistency. A regular daily schedule helps them anticipate mealtimes and keeps their digestive systems on track.



By staying vigilant and implementing these practices, you can help keep your horse happy and healthy, reducing the risk of colic and ensuring a long, thriving life for your equine companion.