

Colic - Prevention and Management

Colic is a term used to describe abdominal pain and remains one of the most common causes of death in horses. Colic symptoms usually indicate a problem with the gastrointestinal system, however the pain can originate from other abdominal organs e.g. liver, kidney, spleen, or urogenital tract.

With over 70 different intestinal problems that cause colic management techniques are essential.

Why is Colic so common?

Horses evolved on a different diet and the manner in which horses eat has changed considerably – unfortunately the intestines of the domesticated horse have not evolved and as a consequence horses are highly susceptible to digestive upset.

Horses are designed to be on the move and grazing on the way. This “trickle feeding” allows the horse to eat large quantities of low energy food throughout the day, commonly spending up to 16 hours a day feeding.

Risk Factors and Prevention

Scientific studies show that colic has many contributing causes. Some are preventable such as parasite control and providing regular dental care. Other risk factors are less easily controlled but by identifying certain horse as high risk individuals vets can assist owners. Horses which have colicked previously are also at greater risk of future colic episodes.

Minimising Colic Risk

- Ensure a constant supply of fresh water
- Keep feeding routines consistent
- Dietary changes should be made gradually over 2-3 weeks
- Maintain consistent turnout routines
- Ration lush spring grass – treating this as a diet change to your horse.
- If box-rest is required due to injury, water & food intake and faecal output should be carefully monitored and water intake increased.
- Set a regular exercise programme – ensuring your horse is physically capable of the work required.
- Keep gastrointestinal parasites at a low level
- Provide regular dental care which should be performed at least every 12 months by a veterinary surgeon or suitably qualified dental technician.

If your horse has to unexpectedly stay in for a few days an example of good management would be not to just leave him standing in the stable. Exercise him (even if in hand) twice a day to keep the guts moving. With unplanned changes it is really important to increase the moisture intake. Soaking hay and making feeds a broth-like consistency can help to keep the guts moving.

What are the symptoms of Colic?

- Lip curling
- Flank watching
- Restlessness
- Pawing the ground
- Posturing to urinate frequently
- Lying down and standing up repeatedly
- Rolling
- Sweating
- Rapid breathing
- Lying on their side for prolonged periods.

What to do if your horse has Colic?

Early detection of colic will increase the chances of a successful outcome so call your vet. Whilst waiting for your vet:

- Remove hard feed and hay
- Check your horse is in a safe place free from hazards
- If possible walk the horse in school or small paddock where the risk of injury to the horse will be reduced if he does get down to roll.
- Do not put yourself in danger – even the most placid gentle horse can become unpredictable and dangerous when colicking.

Colic Treatment

Fortunately around 90% of colic are termed as “medical colic”, which means vets are able to treat these cases with drugs. Medical treatment may include painkillers, gut motility modifiers, oral or intravenous fluids, and gentle exercise.

Diagnosing the exact cause of colic can be challenging but signs of persistent or recurring pain are always an indicator that further investigations are needed.

Around 10% of colic cases require surgical intervention to save the horses life. This is an important decision and the costs of surgery and post operative care need to be considered. If surgery is required to treat colic, it is critical that it is performed as early as possible to maximise the chance of survival.

Dealing with a colicking horse can be a difficult and stressful experience for horse and owner. Familiarising yourself with your horses normal behaviour as well as the signs of colic will alert you to a colic episode. If you are concerned about the colic risk of your horse you should discuss further with your vet.

If you would like any additional information please call us on 01577 841010.