

Understanding Colic in Horses

The word “colic” simply refers to abdominal pain and while this is a very simple definition, colic itself can be hugely complex, ranging from gas pain to total gastrointestinal (GI) obstruction. Colic is one of the most serious illnesses a horse can endure and it is critical for horse owners to recognize the early signs, because the sooner the horse is seen and treated, the greater the chances of recovery.

Signs of colic in the horse vary, but can include not eating, yawning, restlessness, groaning, repeatedly curling the upper lip, looking at flank, continuous or intermittent pawing, circling, and backing into corner or post, standing in a stretched position, lying down repeatedly rolling and sweating excessively. Get your horse to the vet as quickly as possible. If it is a case of mild colic, the horse may be sent home in a few hours. If the colic is severe, expect days--and in the case of surgery--weeks. Time is of the essence when a horse is colicky. Immediate medical attention is an absolute must.

Here are a few simple guidelines while you wait for the veterinarian to come to you or as you prepare for your trip to the vet hospital. First of all, do not allow the horse to have access to hay or grain. Although interest in feed is a good sign, it could make the colic more severe. Second, be prepared to provide your veterinarian with as much information as possible such as clinical signs (pawing, sweating, rolling, etc) rectal temperature (normal between 98 - 101.2), heart rate (normal between 30-40 beats per minute) and the horse's gum color (normally pink). Third, keep the horse comfortable. If the horse lies down and stays down quietly, even in an unusual position, leave him alone. If he wants to get up and change positions periodically and then lie down again, leave him alone. If he constantly gets up and down and tries to roll frequently, walk him around. If the horse seems comfortable with occasional walking then continue. Be cautious of long-term of fast-paced walking as it can actually tire the horse out and cause more dehydration.

Treatment for colic will vary depending on how long it has been going on, severity of clinical signs and vitals and area of GI impaction. Intravenous fluids (IV) may be administered at a very high rate and volume as well as using mineral oil and water passed through a nasogastric (NG) tube to get it into the stomach. Pain medications and GI stimulants may be administered to offer comfort in addition to helping the GI move the obstructed matter. In some cases, emergency surgery may be the only option.

There are a few things the horse owner can do to reduce the risk of colic. 1) always make sure horses have access to fresh water, 2) feed good quality hay and grain, 3) be cautious when deworming out of routine instead of according the Fecal Egg Count (FEG) and never deworm using an Ivermectin product without an FEG being performed, 4) offer salt/mineral block to help increase water intake.

In conclusion, being observant of your horse's normal behavior, stool consistency, eating habits and demeanor will help to quickly alert you to subtle changes that may require medical attention.