

Colic

Any horse can experience colic at any time and place. Though as common as it is, there is no singular explanation for it. Colic is not a disease, but rather a combination of symptoms that present when the horse is experiencing abdominal pain. It ranges from mild to life threatening and should never be taken lightly, as symptoms can progress quickly. Colic is often categorized into 3 groups: intestinal dysfunction, intestinal accidents, or enteritis/ulcerations.

Practitioners agree that there are a few factors that can trigger an onset of colic symptoms: change in diet, change in stabling/housing conditions, change in activity, or change in weather.

The good news is less than 10% of colics are severe enough to require surgery, but the key is early detection. Every colic should be taken seriously in order to prevent mild cases progressing into a more serious situation.

Symptoms:

- Turning head toward flank
- Pawing
- Kicking or biting at the belly
- Stretching as if to urinate but not actually urinating
- Repeatedly lying down and getting up
- Repeated rolling, often with grunting sounds
- Holding head in unusual situation (neck stretched out, head rotated to one side)
- Leaving food behind or being completely disinterested in food
- Putting head down to water without drinking
- Fewer or lack of bowel movements
- Reduced or absent digestive sounds
- Inappropriate sweating
- Rapid breathing or flared nostrils
- Elevated pulse rate (greater than 50 beats per minute)
- Depression and/or isolating themselves from the herd
- Lip curling

A horse may show one or many symptoms of colic. In cases of mild colic the symptoms may be intermittent. It is also important to note that there are many diseases that produce similar symptoms to colic such as: laminitis, foaling, pleuropneumonia, etc.

I think my horse is colicing....

The first thing to do when you think your horse is colicing is assess them and then call your veterinarian. Here are some of the things your veterinary staff may ask when you call:

- Specific symptoms and their severity
- Pulse/heart rate (heart beats per minute)
- Respiratory rate (breaths per minute)
- Rectal temperature
- Colour of their gums
- Moistness of the gums
- Capillary refill time (how fast the colour returns to their gums after pressing on them)
- Digestive sounds (if any)
- Bowel movements (including colour, constancy, and frequency), or lack thereof

- Any recent changes in management, feed, supplements, or exercise
- Relevant medical history including medications and deworming
- Breeding history and pregnancy status if mare or recent breeding history if a stallion
- Insurance status of the horse

On the phone call your vet may have specific recommendations for you to call. But some good ground rules are to:

- Remove all hay and grain from the horse's surroundings
- Ensure there is clean fresh lukewarm drinking water available for you horse
- If necessary, move the horse to a small enclosure (ex- stall or paddock) so you can monitor them closely
- Ensure there is adequate lighting for monitoring and veterinary exam
- As long as the horse is not hurting itself, allow it rest whether standing or lying comfortably
- If the horse is rolling violently, walk them slowly, but try not to walk them more than 15 minutes for every hour
- Continue monitoring until vet arrives or colic signs have resolved

*NOTE: If your horse is insured, it is recommended to call the insurance company after talking with your vet.

DO NOT ATTEMPT (unless specifically trained):

- To pass any kind of tube into the horse's stomach
- Attempt to force any kind of liquid into the horse's mouth, although you can allow them to willingly drink if they desire
- Insert anything (your arm, a hoses, etc.) into the horse's rectum
- Give any medications unless otherwise directed by your veterinarian

Evaluating the horse

Your vet has arrived! The next step is to assess the horse and the situation to determine the severity of the colic and an appropriate treatment plan. You can expect that they will take a full history and review your observations of your horse's behaviour. Next, they will perform a physical exam including vital signs and gastrointestinal sounds. They will also perform a rectal palpation to assess the quality and quantity of feces, feel for distention, displacement or other abnormalities. They may pass a nasogastric (stomach) tube to identify the presence of excess gas or fluid and relieve some pressure since horses are unable to vomit. They may collect a variety of samples such as blood or even fluid from the abdominal cavity. It is important to note that not all of these diagnostic techniques are used in every single case. And they may not be performed in the same order each time. For example, if your horse is too painful to stay standing for the procedures the vet may decide to listen to their heart and then give them a sedative and pain reliever before proceeding to ensure the process is as safe as possible for everyone involved.

Treatment

The treatment course will vary depending on the specific cause of the colic symptoms. Some treatments can be done on farm but others do require a facility and possibly surgery. Some common treatment options include:

- Pain relievers and/or sedatives
- Fluid therapy either by nasogastric tube or intravenous infusion
- Surgery (done under general anesthesia)

There are other options that are only used in very specific cases that your veterinarian will discuss with you if the case arises.

It is very important for your veterinarian to know if referral/surgery is an option for you and your horse. Not every horse that is referred needs to go for surgery. There are many cases that are referred for IV fluids and

monitoring. Cost for this varies depending on the clinic you choose. Often these cases need to be assessed every couple of hours which may include repeated assessment of vitals, administration of pain medications, nasogastric tubing, and/or rectal palpations, which is not feasible on farm. If surgery is needed, it must be performed in a certified facility that has the capabilities of general anesthesia. The type of surgery depends on the cause of colic thus the cost can vary. Many estimates show that colic surgery can range from \$6,000 - \$20,000. An important consideration to take into account if surgery is an option is the after care. Most post-op complications occur 3-6 days after surgery. The specifics of recovery from abdominal surgery will depend on the surgeon and the procedure. In general, the horse will be on stall rest for a long period of time (at minimum 60 days) with short hand walks and a specific diet.

Prevention

We wish we had a crystal ball to help prevent colics, unfortunately sometimes they are just intestinal accidents. But thankfully there are measures we can take to reduce the risks. All vets will agree that management is the key to having a happy and healthy horse. Here are some examples of steps we can take as owners:

- Establish a daily routine: feeding, exercise, turnout, etc.
- Feed a high-quality diet comprised mainly of roughage
- Slowly transition new feeds slowly (even when batches of hay)
- Limit amount of grain/concentrates and divide ration into multiple meals
- Hay is best fed free choice as long as we are not managing an overweight horse
- Have a regular parasite control program
- Provide daily exercise and turnout
- Ensure water source is clean and water is not too cold (especially in winter months)
- Make any changes gradually
- Avoid unnecessary medications and supplements
- Reduce stress, especially when travelling
- Avoid feeding in sandy areas
- Maintain a clean living environment free from toxic substances and plants
- Maintain accurate records of management, feeding, and health conditions