

## Health and Disease Prevention

### **Colic and Management Strategies to Reduce the Risk**

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Equine Colic is the number one killer of horses. Colic means that the horse has abdominal pain and often there is distension of the stomach or intestine caused by an accumulation of feed, gas and/or fluid. The normal movements of the intestine may be static or over active in spasms. Most colic will fall into one of three classifications:

- Intestinal Dysfunction is the most common classification and simply means the horse's bowels are not working properly. Could be caused by gas distention, impaction, spasms and paralysis.
- Intestinal Accidents occur less frequently and include torsions, displacements, and hernias where the section of the intestine becomes trapped in the body cavity. This type of colic almost always requires emergency surgery.
- Enteritis or Ulcerations are related to inflammation, infection, and lesions within the digestive tract. Can be caused by many things including parasites, stress or disease.

The ability to quickly and accurately identify the signs of colic and seek the appropriate help of a veterinarian will maximize the chance of recovery. The most common signs of colic are:

- Kicking or biting at the abdomen
- Pawing
- Lack of appetite – will not eat at all or picks at the feed leaving behind a portion

- Depression – change in attitude – lacks in usual energy
- Sweating
- Absence of, or reduced digestive sounds or “hyperactive” gut sounds – should be 2 or 3 gurgles a minute and a loud growl every 1 to 3 minutes
- Elevated pulse rate (greater than 50 beats per minute)
- Turning the head toward the flank
- Stretching out as if to urinate without doing so
- Rapid respiration and/or flared nostrils – consistently higher than 30 breathes per minute
- Repeatedly lying down and getting up or attempting to do so
- Change in appearance/consistency/quantity of manure
- Rectal temperature below normal could indicate he may be in shock, or an elevated temperature could indicate he has an infectious disease
- Rolling and especially a violent roll
- Repeatedly curling the upper lip

**If you suspect your horse has signs of colic do not delay in treatment, as a severe case could be fatal.** If your horse exhibits signs of colic do the following:

- Notify your veterinarian immediately and he/she will establish the severity of the colic and will try to identify the cause. Be prepared to report on pulse rate, respiratory rate, rectal temperature, color of mucous membranes, capillary refill time, behavioral signs, digestive noises, bowel movements, any changes in feeding or exercise and possibly the medical history of any past cases of colic
- Remove all food and water
- Begin to monitor the gut sounds and vital signs every 15 minutes and record the findings
- Keep the horse as calm and comfortable as possible.

-If the horse is rolling attempt to walk the horse slowly so that the already-distended loops of the intestine will not tangle as this can happen more easily than with the normal relaxed bowel

If the horse shows signs of only mild discomfort, and if you hear a lot of activity in his gut (could be gas build up) try walking him for 20 minutes and let the activity stimulate his intestine to pass the gas and end the colic episode. If the colic does not subside from the walking call your veterinarian immediately.

Horses in some ways are predisposed to colic based on anatomy and the function of their digestive systems; however, proper management plays a large roll in the prevention. The following methods of managing your facility will reduce the risk of colic:

- Set up a regular deworming program. Intestinal parasites can damage the horse's intestines and /or the blood vessels that supply them leading to a life threatening colic. ---
- Check fecal samples to ensure effectiveness.
- Provide daily exercise. A horse's body is designed for constant movement that they get by grazing. If a stall kept horse does not get out of the stall for enough exercise the GI tract will not function normally.
- Establish a regular feeding schedule. Irregular feeding can produce changes in the horse's intestine and motility resulting in painful gas buildups, and even in intestinal twists, or displacements.
- Gradually increase pasture time. Even though grazing is natural, if your horse's digestive system is not use to fresh green grass, unlimited grazing can result in gas colic and also put him at risk for founder.

- Feed a high quality diet comprised primarily of roughage. Always purchase the best quality feed you can afford to as poor quality is hard to digest and can cause gas buildups leading to colic

- Provide fresh clean water at all times (except when the horse is excessively hot)

- Reduce stress – horses experiencing changes in environment or workloads are at high risk of intestinal dysfunction.

- Have the horse's teeth checked at least once a year to ensure no sharp edges on the teeth are making chewing difficult as poorly chewed food can result in an intestinal obstruction

- Do not feed horses from the ground, as they will also ingest sand/dirt. These substances can settle and build up in his stomach/intestine and result in an impaction.

- Divide daily concentrate rations into two or more smaller feedings rather than one large one to avoid overloading the horse's digestive tract.

- Make dietary changes as gradually as possible to give the horse's system time to adjust.

- Avoid medication unless prescribed by your veterinarian

- Check hay, bedding, pasture and environment for potentially ingestible foreign matter.

- Pay special attention to horses that have had previous bouts of colic, as they may be at greater risk or repeated episodes

- Observe foaling mares pre-and post foaling for any signs of colic.

- Pay special attention when transporting horses or changing their environment.

Conclusion:

Any horse is susceptible to colic, therefore, with conscientious care and management, we have the potential to reduce and control colic, the number one killer in horses.

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