

Equine Colic

Colic is a general term used to refer to abdominal pain in horses. There are a number of different types and causes of colic. Whatever the type or cause, colic is a serious condition, as it is responsible for more equine deaths than any other disease. Approximately seven out of every 100 horses will colic at some time during the year. Fortunately, 80% of those cases are simple colics and will resolve with medical therapy. Only 2-4% of colic cases are severe enough to require surgery. There are some predispositions to colic. Thoroughbreds and Arabians tend to colic more than other breeds. Horses younger than two years and older than 10 years are less likely to colic than middle-aged horses. Horses that have had a previous episode of colic are more prone to have repeat episodes. There are, however, a number of causes that you as the owner can control. The key to reducing your horse's risk of colic lies in good horse management.

There are four main types of colic: impaction, gas, volvulus and inflammatory. Impaction colic results when hay or other material occludes the intestinal opening. Gas colic occurs secondary to excess gas formation and can often lead to volvulus, or twisting of the intestine. Inflammatory colic, also known as anterior enteritis, is characterized by inflammation and swelling of the intestine and loss of intestinal motility. The exact cause of this type of colic is still unknown, though some believe it occurs secondary to bacterial overgrowth within the small intestine.

Colic can be caused by a number of things, most of which are management issues. Sudden changes in grain or type of hay are a very common cause of colic, as is overfeeding. Find a good, high quality feed that is appropriate for your horse's life stage and feed only that to your horse. Do not frequently switch brands or types of feed. Make sure, as well, that you are feeding your horse the appropriate amount of grain. Suddenly increasing the amount of grain your horse eats increases your horse's risk of colic. Remember, horses are grazers. They are naturally meant to have small, frequent amounts of food in their stomachs. If you do feed your horse grain, divide the daily ration into two or three smaller meals.

Don't feed the entire ration in one feeding. Ensure that your horse's hay contains highly digestible fiber as poor quality forage predisposes your horse to an impaction. Make sure your horse's pasture is in good condition. Overgrazed pastures expose your horse not only to sand, but also to parasites, both of which are common causes of colic. If your pasture doesn't have a lot of grass or your horse is kept in a dry lot, do not feed your horse on the ground. This increases sand and parasite egg ingestion. Have a good deworming program in place. Not all larval stages are killed by routine dewormers. Neither are tapeworms. Finally, your horse is more likely to colic if he has had a sudden decrease in exercise. Movement is required for gut motility, so your horse is much better off on a well-maintained pasture than in a stall.

Besides those mentioned about, there are a number of causes of colic that are unique to Texas. The majority of colics in Texas are impaction colics due to the large amount of coastal Bermuda grass hay that is fed. Also, Texas is prone to sudden weather changes. Water consumption in horses decreases when the temperature changes drastically from morning to evening. During the cooler nights, your horse doesn't sweat as much and therefore doesn't drink as much water. The temperature rises quickly the next day and your horse is consequently not well-hydrated and can quickly become colicky. To combat this, add table salt or electrolytes to your horses feed during the spring and fall seasons or any other time when the temperature changes more than 30 degrees in a 24-hour period.

Clinical signs of colic include lying down and not wanting to get up, rolling, biting at the abdomen, pawing and not eating. If you are able to listen to your horse's chest and abdomen, you may notice an increase in heart rate and decreased/absent gut sounds. The average 1000 pound horse will have a heart rate of approximately 30 beats per minute and will have large gut movements 1-2 times per minute. The more pain your horse is in, the higher his heart rate will be. Absent gut sounds typically indicate a more severe case of colic than do decreased gut sounds.

If you see your horse colicking, immediately call your veterinarian. It is best not to give any medication or initiate any kind of treatment without your vet

looking at your horse first. Your veterinarian will perform a thorough physical exam, check mucus membrane color, take a heart rate and listen for gut sounds. He/she may also rectally palpate your horse and/or perform an abdominal ultrasound to better assess your horse's gut function. He/she may also recommend blood work, fecal assessment or abdominocentesis (drawing fluid from the abdomen). Treatment varies depending on the type of colic, but typically your veterinarian will give your horse some pain medication and pass a nasogastric tube through your horse's nostril into his stomach. Your vet can then look for reflux and administer water, electrolytes, mineral oil or anything else deemed necessary to make your horse more comfortable. It is often necessary to place an intravenous catheter and begin fluid therapy. Your horse may need to be hospitalized for further treatment and, in severe cases, may require surgery.

Colic is a very serious illness in horses. There are a number of different causes, but fortunately, you as the owner can greatly reduce your horse's risk by implementing good management practices. If your horse does colic, learning to identify the clinical signs and seeking immediate medical attention will give your horse the best chance at a full recovery.