

COLIC

The term “colic” simply means abdominal pain. The cause and severity vary greatly from case to case. Although the word “colic” alone is enough to cause panic and fear in the minds of most horse owners and trainers, the vast majority of cases are isolated incidents that end uneventfully. Approximately 90 percent of colic cases resolve after a single treatment.

What are the symptoms?

A horse with colic will show varying symptoms depending on the cause of the colic, how long it has been present, and the stoicism of the patient. The most common symptom is that horses will have a decreased or absent appetite. Mild colic symptoms include dullness, curling up of the top lip, adopting a ‘straining to urinate’ stance, and lying quietly. As the pain increases, the horse may lie down and stretch or roll, paw the ground repeatedly, or turn to stare at their stomach. Severe colic pain can cause a horse to roll and throw itself about in an uncontrolled and dangerous manner.



Horse rolling with abdominal pain

What causes colic?

Colic can be due to something as simple as a bowel spasm, gas accumulation, or constipation. More common causes include impaction (where the intestine becomes clogged with semi-digested food material), displacement of a segment of bowel from its normal position, torsion or twisting, strangulation through hernias or holes, strangulation by fatty tumors (lipomas) wrapping around them and many other causes of obstruction. Colic can be caused by intestinal parasites, sudden diet changes resulting in upset intestinal bacteria, and insufficient water intake. Even sand in the intestine will cause colic pain. Certain diseases, such as Potomac Horse Fever, can cause colic.

How is colic treated?

Different types of colic require different treatments, so an accurate diagnosis of the cause is the first step. Your veterinarian will conduct a thorough physical exam, often including a rectal palpation, to determine the type of colic your horse is experiencing. Spasmodic colic, with or without gas, (the most common type of colic) responds to antispasmodics and pain killers, like Banamine. Large colon impactions usually respond to treatment by lubrication with water and oil or laxatives given by stomach tube. The most severe cases (about 2% of colics) require urgent aggressive treatment, either medical or surgical, if the horse's life is to be saved. There are some colics that can only be treated by surgery to correct the underlying problem.

What should I do if my horse has colic?

- Call your veterinarian immediately.
- **DO NOT GIVE THE HORSE ANY MEDICATION WITHOUT FIRST CONSULTING WITH YOUR VETERINARIAN!!** The most commonly administered drug in colic cases is Banamine. It is a very strong painkiller, which can also affect the horse's mucous membrane color, temperature, and heart and respiratory rates. All of these are very important parameters that your veterinarian will need to assess in order to evaluate the severity of the horse's condition. Giving this drug prior to a complete physical examination by your veterinarian can significantly alter the examination findings and make it difficult for your veterinarian to determine the cause and severity of the colic.
- Protect yourself! Severely painful horses can be very dangerous.
- If the horse looks uncomfortable, is getting up and down, or is thrashing, etc., try to keep the horse up and walking. This is not always an easy task. It may require more than one person and a whip of some sort. If the horse is quiet, it is ok to let him stand. **Working up a sweat doesn't help him**, especially if he's already dehydrated.
- Try to have a clean bucket of warm water and an empty bucket available when your veterinarian arrives.

How can a vet tell what is causing the colic?

In addition to straightforward clinical examinations of the horse's behavior, attitude, temperature, pulse and respiratory rates and mucous membrane color, veterinary investigations such as rectal examination, taking blood and peritoneal (abdominal) fluid samples, ultrasound scanning and passing a stomach tube can all give indications of the type and severity of the problem. It is not always easy to establish the exact problem and in some cases, surgery is needed to allow examination of the abdominal cavity to pinpoint the abnormality as well as to allow correction or treatment. In many cases your veterinarian will quickly determine whether your horse needs surgery or not, and recommend the appropriate action, which may be referral to a clinic. In all cases, the earlier the decision can be made as to whether medical or surgical treatment is needed and that treatment is begun, the better the horse's chance of survival.



Redworm larvae at the root of intestinal arteries

Can I prevent my horse from getting colic?

To a certain extent - Yes. Regular worming based on fecal results to prevent damage to the intestine and its blood supply helps enormously. Keeping to a routine and avoiding sudden changes in management, feed types, and meal times also helps. Horses and particularly their intestines are creatures of habit. Changes should be made gradually and carefully. Feed changes should be made over 10 days, mixing the old feed with the new. Always have plenty of clean, fresh water available. Regular exercise can help ward off colic, plus providing several other health benefits. Nevertheless, some cases of colic are neither preventable nor predictable. You must be alert to any changes in your horse's or pony's health, attitude, and appetite.

Common Myths about Colic

Myth: *“When a veterinarian does a rectal examination on the horse it is to clear manure out of the rectum.”*

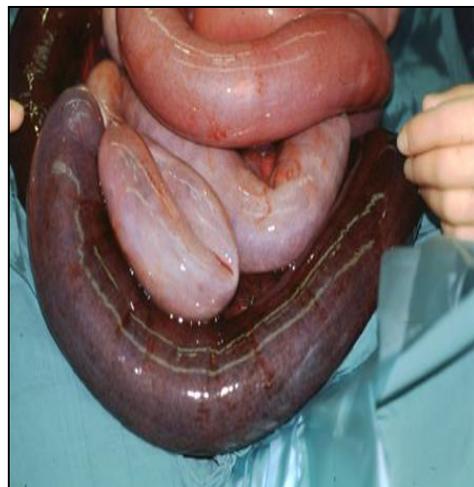
Fact: The manure is cleared out in order to examine organs that are palpable in the abdomen. Although it quite often lends valuable information as to the cause of the colic, a rectal examination may be normal even when a very severe problem is the cause. Sometimes multiple rectal examinations over a period of time are necessary to discern a diagnosis.

Myth: *“Once a horse passes manure, he is on the road to recovery.”*

Fact: Although this is true in many cases, even horses with severe intestinal blockages or twists of the gut may still pass manure.

Myth: *“The horse is standing in such a way that he appears to be having trouble urinating.”*

Fact: Colic due to urinary problems is very, very rare. The horse's stance is an effort to try to alleviate the discomfort it feels, not because it is having difficulty urinating.



Intestines of a horse with colic at surgery. The darker intestines have had their blood supply damaged (strangulated).