



Colic and your horse

Colic is a general term for abdominal pain and while many cases are mild and inconsequential, others can be life threatening. It's very important to take all cases seriously and seek veterinary advice at an early stage.

Horses usually display abdominal discomfort by lying down more than usual, standing with a stretched out posture, repeatedly getting up and down, standing as if to urinate, rolling, turning their head to their flank, pawing the ground or kicking at their abdomen. Generally, the more the severe their pain, the more violently they behave and the more urgent the need for veterinary intervention. Another useful sign to monitor is the colour of their gums, white, purple or bright red gums are an indication that there is something severely wrong.

The source of pain can be from a number of areas such as the kidneys, muscles, liver and reproductive organs. Most commonly, however, colic is attributable to pain originating in the gastrointestinal tract (GIT) or digestive system.

There are several types of colic which lead to abdominal discomfort. These include distension colic which is due to excess gas build up, obstruction colic which might be caused by the impaction of food or the presence of enteroliths (very hard rock like structures that form in the GIT over time) and spasmodic colic where spasms cause the intestines to contract painfully. Strangulations which occur when the gut twists on itself and inflammatory disorders like enteritis and colitis are also responsible for colic.

Vets will do a thorough clinical examination to evaluate the seriousness of the horse's condition. This might include placing a tube into the horse's nose and down to the stomach to allow for the release of pressure accumulated in the stomach.

Most colics respond to conservative medical treatment where we treat with pain relief and provide fluids via the tube to the stomach or in the form of a drip. We might also treat with drugs which enhance passage of gut content, have a laxative effect or help to relieve spasms in the GIT. There are also several alternative therapies which help to play a role in calming the horse and re-establishing normal gut function in some cases.

Those cases that don't respond are best referred to specialist facilities for intensive care and sometimes surgery.

Colic is much better prevented rather than cured. Regular healthcare such as dental check ups and intestinal parasite management are especially important to help prevent colic but of utmost priority is keeping risk factors to a minimum. Risk factors include sudden changes of diet, activity, environmental and management factors like stabling and transport.

Maintain a regular feeding schedule with good quality concentrates and allow access to forage on balanced soils for as much of the day as possible. Avoid overgrazing pastures and ensure constant access to clean water. As far as possible make all changes slowly and monitor horses exposed to high risk situations closely. This will go a long way to keeping your horse colic free.