

Colic

Matt Hanks BVSc MRCVS

Colic is a condition that relates to pain in the abdomen (belly) and is something that most, if not all, horse owners have to contend with at some point.

The word colic is derived from the word 'colon' which is a part of the intestines that all mammals have.

In this article I will describe a veterinarian's approach when presented with a horse that has colic. This may help your understanding as to why some horses seem to have colic often and bounce back from it in no time, and why some horses need to have prolonged treatment and possibly surgery for the same condition.

The anatomy

Let's start by having a quick run down of the intestines of a horse. The order is: Oesophagus—Stomach—Small intestine—Large colon—Small colon—Rectum.

The horse's intestines are huge and can easily weigh 200-250kg. The biggest part is the large colon as this is where the horse ferments the grass. Bacteria

break down the grass and hay and produce nutrients and gas. It's this gas that can be a problem in many colics.

Why horses get colic

No one can ever fully answer this question but it often (not always) boils down to gas. Problems can arise if gas production is excessive, such as when the grass suddenly grows or you change your horse's diet suddenly.

The examination

i) History – A vital part of the examination, involving questions such as 'how long has the horse had colic for?', 'any changes to management?', 'worming history?', 'has the horse passed any droppings?' etc. We will also need the age and breed of your horse and we will also be looking at time of day and time of year, to help give us clues as to the cause of the colic.

ii) Physical exam – Here we try to quickly answer a simple question. Does this horse have a 'medical' or 'surgical' colic? The parameters a vet would use to determine the seriousness of the colic are:

a) Heart rate – as pain increases, adrenaline is released. This not only slows the gut but increases the heart rate.

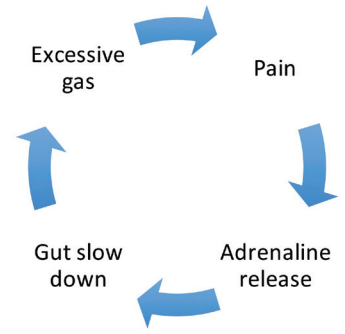
b) Mucus membrane colour and refill time – we will look at your horse's gums and press them to blanch them and see how quickly the blood flows back into the area again. A horse that is suffering from shock will have a slow refill time. The colour is also important. A horse that has a piece of gut that is dying will show dark red or purple mucus membranes.

c) Rectal temperature – can increase a little with stress/pain but a big increase suggests the horse has a 'whole body' illness, and colic may only be the tip of the iceberg.

d) Gut sounds – we will spend quite a while listening to the abdomen in four general areas. Upper flank and lower flank all relate to a different piece or area of intestine. The presence of gut noise is often a good thing but a horse with a real problem will often have little to no gut noise.

e) Rectal exam – probably the most important diagnostic tool when dealing with a horse with colic, but there are limitations. A vet will palpate the rectum for any abnormalities, such as pieces of intestine that shouldn't be there, e.g. small intestine, or areas that are full of gas, e.g. a displacement. The problem with the rectal exam is that the horse is so large and a vet's arm is so short. There is a lot of abdomen that cannot be examined per rectum.

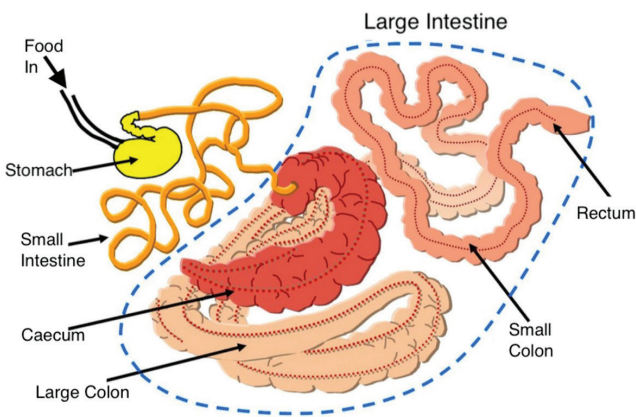
f) Pass a tube – As horses cannot vomit, we pass a tube into their stomachs to see if there is a build-up of fluid that cannot pass



Many colics are caused by excessive gas

along the intestine. This suggests a blockage or twist. Also, if we have performed a rectal exam and discover that the horse has a large colon impaction, we give fluids through the tube to help clear the impaction. So passing the tube is both diagnostic and therapeutic.

Depending on the findings of the physical exam, further diagnostic steps such as blood samples, ultrasound and possibly surgery would be advised.



The horse's intestines

Avoiding and managing colic tips:

- Change diet slowly over a 7-10 day period.
- Keep up with your horse's worming – 80% of spasmodic colic is caused by tapeworms.
- If your horse has colic take away ALL food.
- Walk your horse with colic but not to the point of exhaustion.
- A horse with colic can lie down as long as there is no rolling.

For further strategies to avoid colic phone your vet or phone Central Equine Vets on 0131 6645606.



Central Equine Veterinary Services Ltd

Edinburgh: 0131 664 5606

Kinross: 01577 863333

info@centralequinevets.co.uk - www.centralequinevets.co.uk

