

August 2021 Newsletter

Colic

Unfortunately as an equine owner you are highly likely to come across colic. It can have very variable clinical signs and outcomes so it is important to be able to recognise it and ring a vet as soon as possible.

What actually is colic?

The term colic refers to abdominal pain so is very non specific. It can be due to a variety of things including but not limited to spasmodic pain, gas, impaction, ulceration, parasites, displacement or twist in an intestine or even a rupture of an intestine or the stomach.

What signs might a horse or donkey show if they have colic?

- The horse may be quiet in themselves
- Rolling
- Pawing at the ground
- Flank watching
- Not eating
- Breathing quickly
- Increased heart rate
- Sweating
- Lying down
- Away from the herd
- Not passing faeces or producing less than normal or of a different consistency to normal



What should I do if I suspect my horse or donkey has colic?

It is important to call your vet as soon as possible to enable your horse to be thoroughly examined and treated. Some colics can become life threatening very quickly if left untreated.

How do you work out what the cause of colic is?

The clinical signs and how long they have been displayed for can help guide us in our exact diagnosis but we will also perform a full physical examination and a rectal examination. We may also pass a nasogastric tube into the stomach to make sure there isn't a blockage in their stomach or small intestines resulting in food and fluid filling up their stomach. We may also take bloods to identify if there are any organ changes or signs of peritonitis. We may also need to ultrasound the horse's abdomen to see if their intestines and stomach appear normal. We may also want to sample the fluid in their abdomen, in a test called a peritoneal tap, where we take a small sample from the lowest part of their abdomen, This can tell us if there is peritonitis, an internal bleed or a potential rupture of an organ

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What should I do whilst I am waiting for a vet?

- Keep yourself safe. If your horse is going down and rolling it is important to keep out the way. A horse in pain may not mean to but they can, in their distress knock, into you and cause significant damage. If the horse is thrashing around, stay out of the stable, paddock or arena they are in, until the vet gets there.
- Take food away from your horse but don't take water away.
- If possible move the horse somewhere where it is safe to roll such as an arena or small paddock.
- Don't stop your horse rolling, they are unlikely to cause themselves more harm as long as they are in a safe space.
- Keep your phone on you so the vet attending can contact you if they can't find you.
- Mild colics can be gently walked but if the horse won't walk or is wanting to keep going down don't walk them.
- If possible let someone else know what is going on and where you are in case you do get injured.
- If referral is an option, have transport organised in case it is needed.



What might the vet do treatment wise?

The treatment very much depends on the cause of the colic. If the colic is mild the vet may give some pain relief and anti spasmotic medication. In other instances the horse may need oral fluids, given via a nasogastric tube. In more severe cases the horse may want IV fluids or surgery. The horse at this point will be referred to an equine hospital. Unfortunately some cases at arrival may require euthanasia if the horse's pain levels cannot be controlled or an irreversible event has occurred such as a major rupture.

How can I reduce the risk of my horse or donkey getting colic?

- Ensure they have access to clean water at all times.
- Have regular dental checks– ideally at least yearly to reduce the risk of impaction colics.
- Avoid sudden changes in diet and routine
- Perform regular worm egg counts every 2-3 months with once a year worming for tape worm
- Ensure your horse receives regular exercise and turn out – colon activity correlates with exercise, if stuck in a stable, the equine's intestinal motility will slow down. Stabling a horse for 24 hours each day greatly increases risk.
- Keep a close eye on your horse to identify any mild signs of colic and call a vet as soon as possible, a mild colic can worsen if a horse then doesn't drink.
- If travelling to a show, take your own water. Some horses won't drink water that tastes different to what they are accustomed to (this also lowers their risk of respiratory disease please see July 2021 newsletter)

For more information on how to recognise a horse or donkey with colic please see our website for further information and our YouTube channel.