

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



COLIC: PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Colic is the term used to describe abdominal pain – it can indicate a problem with the gut itself or other organs within the abdomen. There are many causes, ranging from simple indigestion to a twisted gut. Prevention is essential and, by following simple management techniques, the risk of a horse getting it can be reduced but not eliminated.



Signs of colic

In addition to general changes in behaviour a horse with colic may exhibit some or all of the following signs.

- Restlessness and pawing at the ground
- Sweating and increased breathing rate
- Irritated kicking to the stomach
- Stretching as if to urinate
- Rolling or attempting to roll
- Elevated pulse rate

Why is colic so common?

Horses evolved on a different diet from the one they're expected to eat today. The manner in which horses eat and the time they spend eating has changed considerably – even a horse living at grass eats a different diet from his ancestors.

Unfortunately for the domesticated horse, his intestines have not evolved to meet these changes and, as a consequence, he is susceptible to digestive upset.

A horse's digestion involves fermentation of which a by-product is gas, which can easily distend the gut causing problems.

Horses cannot vomit to get rid of toxins, or indigestible food.

The gut has a large absorptive area (needed because the animal is a herbivore) which leaves the horse susceptible to toxins being absorbed quickly.

Also, natural feeding habits mean that nature designed the horse to be on the move, grazing on the way. This is known as



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“trickle feeding” whereby the horse eats large quantities of low-energy food throughout the day, typically spending 16 hours a day feeding.

Today’s management of horses often indicates two feeds a day of hard feed, rationed hay and stabling for eight hours without exercise or food. This is obviously very different to the life the horse was designed to lead. This change from the natural and ideal situation means that horses can react to any added stress on their lifestyle, which is often the cause of colic.

Risk factors

- Digestive disorder such as tooth problems, worm burdens and gut damage (including previous colic surgery)
- Poor feeding regime: soiled food, inappropriate quantities, lack of fibre and/or water, or a sudden change in diet
- Stress such as hard exercise while unfit or after eating, travelling, sudden change of routine or environment
- Poor and over-grazed pasture, especially if the soil is sandy

Prevention

- A constant supply of fresh water
- Small and frequent feeds of concentrates if necessary. Only use hard feed as a supplement to the grazing and high fibre food available to the horse.
- Plan a diet consisting of high fibre content, using hay or other high fibre equivalent feeds. A ratio of at least 60 per cent hay or equivalent.
- Ensure the feed is of good quality and is not mouldy, and has no hidden hazards such as baling twine/plastic
- Set a regular exercise programme, ensuring that the horse is fit for the work needed. Do not suddenly overexert your horse.



- Have a post-exercise cooling off period
- Make any changes to exercise or feed slowly
- Allow as much turn out in a paddock as possible
- Have regular dental checks as poorly chewed food increases the risk of a blockage in the intestine
- Do not overgraze pasture
- Ration lush spring grass, treating it as a change of diet to the horse
- Wherever possible, avoid your horse grazing heavily sanded pasture
- Ensure the worm control programme is kept up to date as recommended by your vet
- Have a regular daily routine and make changes gradually

Helpful hints

Early detection of colic will improve the chances of a successful outcome so know your horse's signs of good health. Be aware of temperature, pulse rate and respiratory rate.

Be especially vigilant with any horse that has a history of colic.

What to do if your horse has colic

Colic should be treated as an emergency and the veterinary surgeon should be called as soon as possible.

If your horse shows symptoms as described above (that are not normal) call your vet. By knowing your horse's normal pulse temperature and respiratory rate, you can inform the vet of any changes.

- Remove feed and hay from the horse
- Check the horse is in a safe area, free from hazards
- If your horse is anxious, rolling, or restless and is in a safe area such as a large stable or corral, keep watching but do not interfere
- If the symptoms are mild, walking gently may help, but follow your vet's advice and do not put yourself or the horse in danger of injury

Treatment

For mild cases of colic, the vet may administer drugs to relieve pain and relax the horse, which may allow the gut to start working properly. Monitor your horse's progress and keep your vet informed of any changes.

In more serious cases that do not respond to initial drug treatment, your vet may recommend surgery, which will involve transporting the horse to the local equine hospital. If you know your horse has a history of colic, be extra vigilant in all areas of your horse's routine and management.



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While waiting for the vet

Keep the horse as calm and quiet as possible, monitor the signs, and do not give anything to eat or drink. Check when the animal was last wormed and if anything unusual was eaten prior to the onset of symptoms.

A significant number of colic cases are as a result of, or exacerbated by, worms. Routine worming and monitoring of the efficiency of the worming programme is essential good management.

Incorrect feeding practices can also result in the onset of colic (see the All About Pets leaflet, Feeding and Watering (H7)).

Stress can also cause colic, so sensible management and consideration of the horse's needs can help minimise this and prevent associated health problems.

Choke

Horses with choke can present similar symptoms to colic. An object (usually a piece of food) becomes stuck in the horse's oesophagus, which causes choking. Horses then appear distressed, their necks can go in to spasm and they may drool saliva, as well as food and mucus from the nose and mouth.

A choke will often clear itself, but call a vet for advice. At the onset of symptoms, monitor the horse and, if symptoms persist for more than half an hour, call the veterinary surgeon.

To avoid your horse choking, always make sure any hard feed is dampened down with water and any succulents are cut into long thin pieces rather than squares, so they are less likely to cause an obstruction. Ensure that there is adequate chaff added to the feed as this prevents bolting the feed, which can cause choke.



Related Blue Cross publications

The following leaflets from the *All About Pets* series may be useful.

- *Worm control and pasture management (H6)*
- *Feeding and watering (H7)*
- *Routine healthcare in horses (H8)*
- *Laminitis (H14)*

Pictures of colic have been kindly supplied by Bourton Vale Equine Clinic.

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

All About Pets provides expert advice, information and support for pet owners. It aims to ensure the welfare of Britain's pets by promoting responsible animal care. For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is a service of The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity, which provides practical support, information and advice for pet and horse owners. Through our network of animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year. Our hospitals provide veterinary care for the pets of people who cannot afford private vets' fees.

How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding. We rely entirely on the generosity of pet lovers to help support All About Pets and other vital animal welfare projects. Any contribution would be most welcome. For more information on how you can help call us on 01993 822651 or visit our website at www.bluecross.org.uk.



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