

Client Factsheet #3: Colic

What is colic?

“Colic” is the name given to abdominal pain in horses. It can arise from pain in the stomach, the intestines, or (rarely) the urinary and reproductive systems. Colic can present as mild, moderate or severe colic; most mild colic cases will resolve in the field with pain relief and medication to stop muscle cramps. More severe cases may be life-threatening and require emergency surgery.

How can mild colic be differentiated from severe colic?

Signs of mild colic include restlessness, pawing at the ground, and flank watching. Signs of moderate colic include kicking at abdomen, lying down frequently or lying flat out for long periods of time, and stretching out as if trying to urinate. Signs of severe colic include sweating, violent rolling, and injuries from self-trauma (wounds to head or body).

What should I do if my horse is colicking?

If your horse is exhibiting any signs of colic, you should call your vet immediately. You should remove food from the stable and monitor for any droppings which may be passed. If your horse is trying to roll and looks like they might hurt themselves doing so, you can walk them gently around the yard, if you can do so without risk to yourself.

What can the vet do if my horse is colicking?

Your vet will assess your horse’s heart rate, respiratory rate, capillary refill time, mucus membranes, temperature and gut sounds (borborygmi). These provide a baseline assessment of how painful your horse is. The vet may then perform a rectal examination and pass a nasogastric tube. These allow them to detect distension or impaction of the intestines. The nasogastric tube allows for the release of reflux, as horses cannot vomit. The vet may take a sample of peritoneal fluid by inserting a needle into the abdomen (abdominocentesis).

If your horse is showing mild signs and has supporting clinical findings, the vet may then give them pain relief and medication to stop muscle cramps. If your vet detects an impaction (a firm area within the intestines which is preventing the passage of normal faeces) they may give laxatives via the nasogastric tube. If your horse’s signs resolve with medical treatment, you should wait until they have passed normal faeces before introducing small amounts of fibrous food (soaked hay, bran mash) and ensure they are comfortable with this before gradually introducing their normal feeding again.

What happens if my horse has severe colic?

If your horse is showing signs of severe colic, the vet might have to give sedation and pain relief in order to finish the examination. They might be able to feel twisted intestines on examination or release a lot of reflux when they pass the nasogastric tube. If this is the case, the best option for your horse is colic surgery. Your vet will arrange referral to the nearest equine hospital for further assessment and surgery.

Can colic be prevented?



Unfortunately, many cases of colic are not preventable. Gradual changes to feeding regimes and a good preventative health scheme can reduce the chances of colic developing, e.g. due to worms, but some colics are unavoidable.