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COLIC

The term "colic" simply means abdominal pain. There are many causes of colic and symptoms range from very mild to violent.

What are the symptoms?

A horse with colic will show varying symptoms depending on the cause of the colic, how long it has been present and the stoicism of the patient. Mild colic symptoms include dullness, curling up of the top lip, adopting a 'straining to urinate' stance and lying quietly. As the pain increases, the horse may lie down and stretch or roll, paw the ground repeatedly or turn to stare at their stomach. Severe colic pain can cause a horse to roll and throw itself about in an uncontrolled and dangerous manner.



Horse rolling with abdominal pain

What causes colic?

Colic can be due to something as simple as a bowel spasm, gas accumulation, or constipation. More common causes include impaction (where the intestine becomes clogged with semi-digested food material), displacement of a segment of bowel from its normal position, torsion or twisting, strangulation through hernias or holes, strangulation by fatty tumours wrapping around them and other causes of obstruction.

How is colic treated?

Different types of colic require different treatments, so an accurate diagnosis is the first step. Spasmodic colic, with or without gas, (the most common type of colic) responds to antispasmodics and pain killers. Large colon impactions usually respond to treatment by lubrication with oil or laxatives given by stomach tube. The most severe cases (about 2% of colics) require urgent aggressive treatment, either medical or surgical, if the horse's life is to be saved. There are some colic's that can only be treated by operating to correct the underlying problem.



Intestines of a horse with colic at surgery. The darker intestines have had their blood supply damaged (strangulated).

What should I do if my horse has colic?

Call your veterinarian immediately and explain the symptoms. Persistent severe pain usually indicates a serious problem and an emergency situation. If possible, keep the horse walking. Remember that the key to success with colic is early diagnosis and treatment. It is better that the horse has recovered when the veterinarian arrives rather than waiting too long before seeking help and risking the life of the horse.

How can a vet tell what is causing the colic?

In addition to straightforward clinical examinations of the horse's behaviour, attitude, temperature, pulse and respiratory rates and mucous membrane colour, veterinary



Redworm larvae at the root of intestinal arteries.

investigations such as rectal examination, taking blood and peritoneal (abdominal) fluid samples, ultrasound scanning and passing a stomach tube can all give indications of the type and severity of the problem. It is not always easy to establish the exact problem and in some cases, surgery is needed to allow examination of the abdominal cavity to pinpoint the abnormality as well as to allow correction or treatment. In many cases your veterinarian will quickly determine whether your horse is surgical or not, and recommend the appropriate action, which maybe referral to a clinic. In all cases, the earlier the decision can be made as

to whether medical or surgical treatment is needed and that treatment is begun, the better the horse's chance of survival.

Can I prevent my horse from getting colic ?

To a certain extent - Yes. Regular worming to prevent damage to the intestine and its blood supply helps enormously. Keeping to a routine and avoiding sudden changes in management and feed type also helps. Horses and particularly their intestines are creatures of habit. Changes should be made gradually and carefully. Feed changes should be made over 10 days, mixing the old feed with the new. Always have plenty of clean, fresh water available. Regular exercise can help ward off colic, plus providing several other health benefits. Nevertheless, some cases of colic are neither preventable nor predictable. You must be alert to any changes in your horse or pony's health.

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