

COLIC IN HORSES

Colic (abdominal pain) can be a life-threatening condition of rapid onset so detection of early symptoms and prompt veterinary intervention is advisable. In very early cases of colic the only observable sign may be a decreased appetite or mild depression and so signs may be initially non-specific for gut pain. Horses may sweat, turn repeatedly to look at their abdomen, curl their lip, may appear to be straining to defaecate or appear bloated in the abdomen. Manure may be passed in frequent small volumes, possibly with a changed consistency (excessively wet or very dry and dark), or no manure may be passed at all. Many horses go on to roll on the ground, lie down, sit like a dog, strike at the ground or at their abdomens and violently fling themselves around, usually causing trauma to their heads and limbs.

Colic can progress from very mild signs to extreme distress very quickly so early veterinary intervention is highly recommended. Food should be withheld in the interim and sometimes walking the horse briskly to prevent them rolling or going down on the ground may be advisable if the horse can still be safely handled. This may prevent torsion of the gut (twisting) while the horse is rolling but extreme care to prevent personal injury should be undertaken and owners should not put themselves at risk. If it is too dangerous to approach the animal and keep it on its feet then it should be left on the ground until the veterinarian's arrival.

The causes of colic are numerous and in many cases no inciting cause can be determined. Most cases of colic may be related to the buildup of gas in the gastrointestinal tract causing distension of the intestines/stomach which is extremely painful. Blockages of the gut by foreign bodies, food impaction, sand impaction, worm burdens, tumours and twists of intestines are serious emergencies as blood supply to the gut may be compromised and the gut may perforate, spilling its contents into the abdominal cavity. Prolonged diarrhoea, bacterial infections and conditions causing spasming of the gastrointestinal tract can also manifest with signs of colic.

Some cases of colic can be treated and corrected medically with the administration of pain relief, anti-inflammatories, sedatives, intravenous fluids and stomach drenches while other cases may require surgical correction at a specialist centre. Initial veterinary examination of the horse may include assessment of heart rate, gum colour, hydration status, gut motility through auscultation of the abdomen, palpation of abdominal organs and contents via rectal examination, faecal examination following rectal examination, passage of a stomach tube and collection of abdominal fluid via a belly tap. This initial examination plays an important role in determining whether the colic may be corrected medically, whether it requires surgical intervention and as a prognostic guide to the expected survival of the animal. Multiple examinations and treatments may be required and a colic that may initially have been a medical case may progress to one requiring surgery very

quickly. If you suspect your horse may be exhibiting signs of colic, regardless of how mild, it is best to seek prompt veterinary advice as early as possible.