

COLIC

What It Is

A term used to describe a large range of abdominal discomforts, colic can be anything from a twisted intestine to an enterolith to worm infestations. Colic is the #1 natural killer of horses.

Common Causes

Colic can be caused by many things. Here are some common causes:

Sand Colic: When horses ingest sand. Horses that are fed on sandy ground or have access to it may eat small bits of sand. Over time, the sand will build up in the intestines and eventually cause discomfort. The horse may be carrying 30-80 pounds before showing signs of colic.

Over feeding: If a horse breaks into the feed area and gorges itself colic could result.

Parasitism: Worm infestations disrupt circulation in the intestines, or blood clots and bits of dead worms may cause blockages.

Irregular Feed Schedule: This may cause a horse to wolf feed if he gets really hungry. Feeding right after work or if horse is still hot also can cause horse to come down with colic.

Sudden Changes in Feed: When you change feeds, or introduce new feed, be sure you do so slowly!

Bad Feed: Moldy or rotten feed may cause colic.

Ingestion of Non-feed materials: Stones, sticks, twine, and wood splinters are examples. Cribbers or horses that chew wood have a risk of swallowing bits and getting colic.

Fine Grain: Sometimes it will pack together and cause blockages in the intestine.

Poisons: Some poisons may cause colic. Moldy feed may cause mold poisoning and colic.

Twisted Intestines: Very severe and life-threatening. There are different types of twists in different areas, and they each have names. Here are a few:

Strangulation: When parts of intestine become entangled in tears in the supportive membrane.

Incarceration: Intestine is caught in inguinal ring of male horses, and blood supply is cut off by twisting.

Intussusception: One part of the intestine falls into the other. More common in foals than older horses.

Most colics can be classified as one of these 3 types:

Intestinal Dysfunction

The horse's digestive tract is not working properly. Impaction, paralysis, and excessive gas are examples. This type is the most common.

Intestinal Accidents

This is where the intestines are injured or torn, and are less common than the type mentioned above, but usually require emergency surgery.

Enteritis or Ulcerations

This is a colic caused by infections, inflammations, and disease in the intestine, which can be caused by many factors, such as parasites and stress.

Signs

The first signs you may see are uneasiness and a personality change. The horse may be uninterested in food or drink, and may act sleepy or dull. The temperature may be slightly higher than normal, but the respiration and pulse will usually be normal. Later on, the horse may swish its tail, stomp a hind leg, turn and look at belly, or nip its sides. It may also roll its eyes, snort, or groan. As the pain increases, the horse may kick its belly and lie on the ground and stretch. It may also stretch as if to urinate, or may make attempts to defecate with no success or may have diarrhea. It may roll lightly, get up and walk in circles, then lie down and roll again. It may also walk aimlessly into fences or walls. As the colic worsens, the horse may bite its sides, kick and thrash, and may roll madly. NEVER let a colicking horse roll, because it could twist an intestine and cause serious injury! Try to get the horse up, even if it means yelling at or hitting the horse. Be VERY CAREFUL- a colicking horse in severe pain doesn't care what or who you are, it may step on you or crush you accidentally. During this time, the horse's only focus is trying to rid

itself of pain, and it won't be aware of its surroundings. It may walk into walls or fences or step on things. You should catch it and, if it is rolling, make it stand; then, proceed to walk it for about 15 minutes.

Symptoms of colic include...

Rolling excessively

Sweating

Pawing

Kicking at belly

Looking at or biting belly

Change in attitude, or depression

Lack of appetite

Unable to defecate

Little or no gut sounds

Sitting like a dog or lying down

Stretching out as if to urinate

Restlessness, or lying down, getting up, lying down again, etc.

Treatment:

If you suspect your horse has colic, record all the symptoms it is showing, take the horse's vital signs, then call the vet immediately and tell him what you've observed. Return to the horse, walk him for about 15 minutes, then release him in a safe area and watch his behavior. A simple colic can quickly turn deadly without prompt attention. If your horse is already rolling on the ground, thrashing, and sweating, get him up as soon as possible! A horse that is rolling may twist an intestine or complicate an otherwise minor colic. Remember, a colicking horse may be dangerous to be around since it is in pain. Move carefully and be aware when with one. You may have to pull on or even hit the horse to get it to rise, but even if you have to, it's better to do it than to let your horse roll and complicate his colic. If you cannot get the horse up and it is pounding its head against the ground, get a pillow, blanket, or other soft material and carefully place it under the animal's head.

If the weather is extreme, provide shelter for the horse by putting him in a safe stall or barn, and if that is not available, a garage or shed may work. If there is anyway for the horse to harm himself, do not turn him loose, but have someone hold him. Keep all food and water away from the horse until the vet arrives. Try to keep the horse as calm as possible, and keep it from rolling if possible. You may want to walk the horse for a few minutes, then let the horse stand or lie relaxed.

DO NOT CONTINUE TO WALK THE HORSE. Many people will walk a horse for hours, until it is weak and exhausted. Walking can do a bit of good, but over-walking can weaken the horse and even lead to death if the colic turns severe. If the horse isn't feeling better after 15 minutes of walking, then 3 more hours won't make a difference, either. Most likely, if a little walking doesn't help, the horse will require surgery, and if it's been over-walked, it is less likely to live through the surgery and fully recover. If you do walk the horse too much, its nervous system may shut down, creating more problems. There are many people that will walk a horse for hours, even all night long, thinking that it will do some good. It won't.

Do not EVER administer any colic drugs without talking to your vet. Do not use a product called 'Canadian Bells', because it may shut down the functions of the intestines, complicating the colic. Do not use any products that contain Atropine. Though it may relieve pain quickly, it also slows or stops intestinal action, and sometimes the intestines may not recover. Enemas, too, are useless in adult horses; they just create more pain for a colicking horse.

Tranquilizers will NOT make the horse feel any better or prevent the colic from worsening. They should NEVER be used unless the horse is acting so crazy that it is impossible to treat him. They lower the blood pressure, which may increase risk of death in some colics. Tranquilizers are rarely used on colicking horses.

DO NOT EVER administer mineral oil yourself. The horse may inhale it and die. Instead, leave it up to your vet; he/she will pass a stomach tube and give the oil that way.

Once your vet arrives he will try to determine what is wrong with the horse, and he may do a rectal examination, abdominal tap, or listen to the horse's gut sounds. Most likely, he will administer pain killers such as Phenylbutazone, Butraphol, or Morphine. If the colic is due to muscle spasms, he will likely administer a muscle

relaxant, and if it's an impaction he will give a laxative. Laxatives containing antibiotics may be given via stomach tube to kill any gas-causing bacteria and to help clear the intestines. A gallon or more of mineral oil may be given via stomach tube if the horse has gorged himself on feed, is impacted, or has been poisoned. If the colic is caused by a twist or a severe blockage, surgery may be needed. If a section of the intestine has been twisted or blocked for long, it may die off. That section will have to be removed, and the healthy ends stitched together. Colic surgery is often expensive, but it may be needed to save the horse's life.

If you are planning to go camping or trail riding a long way from vets or doctors, be sure to pack a good first aid kit to treat both horse and human injuries. Include Phenylbutazone tablets (horse pain reliever) in your kit, and use them according to your vet's prescription. If your horse colics and help is far away, you can give these to relieve the pain. They won't cure the colic, and they will stop the symptoms, but they will give your horse some relief. Walk the horse for 30 minutes to an hour to get him to relax, and hopefully feel better. There isn't a whole lot you can do without a vet, but the best thing is to prevent colic in the first place by having a regular deworming schedule, good feed and feeding habits, and clean water.

Recovery

Only about 10% of horses die from colic, but it is still the leading natural killer of horses. Colics due to torsions and intestinal twists are nearly 100% fatal unless promptly treated.

The horse is most likely to recover if his pulse has not reached 60 (normal is 26-40), if his temperature is around normal, and if he gets prompt treatment. Horses that have pulses over 80, elevated temperatures, and are still showing symptoms after 24 hours have a very slim chance of pulling through. The longer you wait to get treatment, the less likely the horse is to survive. If the colic is bad and an emergency operation is needed, QUICKLY decide if you want to save the horse or not. It's not good to wait four hours then decide you'll operate; the longer you wait, the less chance of survival the horse has.

After the vet has treated your horse, in most cases within an hour or two he should show relief and his symptoms should decrease. His temperature and pulse, if previously elevated, should return to normal. He should stop sweating, and should act calmer and happier. If the condition doesn't improve or worsens, call your vet again and let him know.