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COLIC

The definition of colic is abdominal pain. This could be from any organ within the abdomen, but in horses mainly refers to intestinal pain.

Signs of colic include pawing the ground, rolling, flank watching, sweating, restlessness and in-appetence. Colic can result from a change in feed/management, but in some cases there is no identifiable cause.

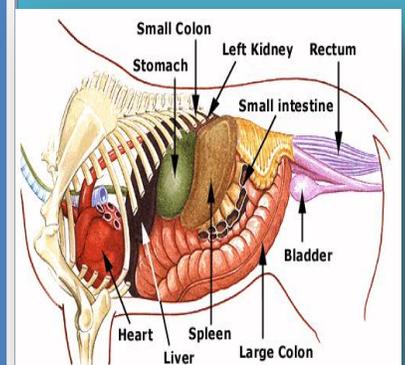
If you suspect your horse has colic it is a good idea to call the vet straight away, as some types of colic can be serious or life threatening and your horse can deteriorate rapidly.

The history of the colic is very important so please let your vet know about any management changes/previous colic episodes. Your vet will use your horse's demeanour, heart rate, respiratory rate, membrane colour, gut sounds and rectal exam to decide on the best course of action.

Different types of colic commonly seen are:

Spasmodic colic

This is where the intestine spasms, and could follow a change in diet or management. Sometimes gas will build up in portions of the intestine. It can be very painful, gut sounds will often continue throughout the colic. This type of colic will often respond to muscle relaxant.



Impaction colic

This is where feed material build up and obstructs flow in part of the intestine, most commonly at the pelvic flexure of the large colon, where it undergoes a 180 degree bend. This can follow a period of box rest or dehydration. The pelvic flexure can often be felt on rectal exam.

Displacements

The horse has a very large and mobile colon. Sometimes this can move into the wrong place in the abdomen and the passage of food and gas can be impeded as a result. These horses can be very painful, some may require surgical correction.

Strangulating colic

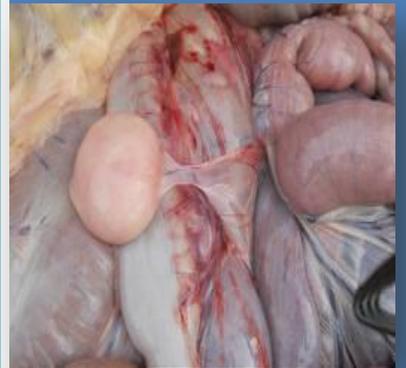
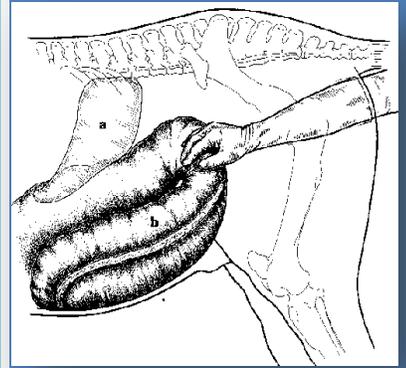
This is where the intestines are compressed from the outside and obstructed. This can be due to a pedunculated lipoma (a small fatty lump that will hang inside the abdomen on a stalk of connective tissue) wrapping around the intestines, or the intestines twisting on themselves or moving into potential spaces in the abdomen with restricted openings. This can cause complete obstruction of small intestine, including the blood supply. Sometimes this will result in death of a portion of the intestine, and these horses generally require surgery.

Stomach ulcers

If severe, these can be very painful and result in generalized colic signs. Diagnosis is made via gastroscopy where a camera is passed into the stomach to look at the lining for ulcerations or erosions. Ulcers are often fairly easily treated with acid suppressants and management changes.

Before the vet gets to you...

If there is a delay before the vet can reach you, walking your horse may help to relieve pain. If it is dangerous to do so it is best to leave the horse in a safe place and allow it to roll. Please remove all food (leave bedding in case the horse lies down). Do not administer medication unless the vet has instructed you to do so.



Treatment

Treatment is always case specific, but may involve pain relief, muscle relaxants and sedation to calm the horse. The vet may pass a stomach tube up the nose and into the stomach to check for fluid building up in the stomach and to administer laxative treatment if they suspect an obstruction. They may take blood samples or a sample of the peritoneal fluid (the fluid that sits around the intestines in the abdomen) to help work out which type of colic your horse has.

Sometimes a diagnosis cannot be reached immediately and the plan will depend on the response to initial medication, so be prepared to monitor your horse for the following hours and for the vet to re-visit if necessary.

If your horse is dehydrated it may need to be admitted to the clinic for intra-venous fluid administration, or further diagnostics, such as abdominal scans.

If your horse does not respond to medical therapy or a surgical lesion is suspected (e.g. a strangulating obstruction) your vet may recommend referral to a surgical facility where the appropriate treatment can be carried out. It is good to have a list of emergency contacts and transport in case this happens in the middle of the night!

Prevention

Making changes to your horse's routine slowly and gradually can prevent certain types of colic. Regular exercise is good to keep the intestines moving, if your horse has to be box rested soaking hay may help to prevent impaction of feed. Regular dental checks to ensure your horse can chew feed properly are also important. Using a worming programme and allowing unlimited drinking water are also important. Ultimately some colics are not preventable or predictable. A quick diagnosis and treatment can make a big difference in the success of treatment.



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