



DODSON & HORRELL

ANIMAL HEALTH, NUTRITION AND WELL-BEING

FEEDING SUCCESS

COLIC

All you need to know

What are the symptoms of colic?

Colic is a term used to describe abdominal pain.

The signs of colic can be variable and sometimes not that obvious. In mild cases the horse may appear restless, stop eating, produce less or no droppings, watch their flanks or dig at the ground, whereas in more serious cases they may lie flat out, roll violently, sweat profusely and have significantly elevated respiratory rates. Early diagnosis and treatment of colic is essential to give your horse the best possible chance of a full recovery.

90% of colic cases can be treated with pain relief and anti-spasmodic drugs. In around 10% of cases surgery may be required.

The decision to operate should not be taken lightly; there is a small risk of mortality (1:200) from the anesthetic, it can easily cost over £5k and recovery will take several months of box rest. Colic can be life threatening so early diagnosis and treatment is essential. If your horse or pony develops signs of colic you should contact your vet immediately.

What causes colic?

Colic can be caused by a number of different things. In many cases colic is idiopathic, meaning that the cause is unknown. The most common types of colic can be broadly classified as:

Impaction: This is when food or sand creates a blockage in the digestive tract, commonly at the pelvic flexure or the ileum. Risk factors include abrupt changes in management, poor dental condition and tapeworm burden.

Spasmodic: This is the most common type of colic and occurs when the gut contracts abnormally. Often the underlying cause is unknown, but significant tapeworm infestation, stress or excitement are recognised risk factors.

Tympanic/gaseous: This is when there is a build-up of gas stretching the gut wall in the large intestine. Risk factors include changes in diet, poor dental care and crib-biting.

Displacement occurs when a section of the large intestine moves from its normal location.

Strangulation is when the blood supply to a section of the gut is cut off.

Torsion is caused when the large colon twists around itself, cutting off the blood supply.



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MANAGING & FEEDING TO AVOID COLIC

Colic is not always preventable, but there are a number of things you can do to reduce the risk.

There are other factors which effect your horses risk of colic:

- Horses with gastric or colonic ulcers may be at increased risk of developing colic. If you suspect that your horse has ulcers then you should seek veterinary advice and your horse could benefit from a low starch and sugar diet.
- Studies show that horses with another disease or undergoing medical treatment could be at increased risk of colic. This could be due to increased stress.
- Horses who have had colic surgery previously should be managed carefully as they may be predisposed to developing colic again.
- Horses recovering from an anaesthetic following an operation could be at an increased risk.

MANAGING & FEEDING TO AVOID COLIC

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Introduce dietary changes slowly

- The risk of colic is highest 14 days of making dietary changes. All changes should be made gradually over a 2 week period. This isn't restricted to just changes in concentrate feed. Sudden changes to the forage source can cause significant disturbances to the bacterial population in the hind-gut, increasing the risk of colic.

Feed plenty of forage

- We recommend that horses receive between 2 and 2.5% of their bodyweight per day in forage. Generally, horses at grass are less likely to have colic, however during the spring and autumn flush in grass growth certain horses and ponies may require restricted grazing. When not at grass, horses should be fed ad-lib preserved forage to maintain digestive health. Some overweight horses may require forage restriction but this should only be done under veterinary supervision. If your horse cannot chew hay or haylage (e.g. due to poor dental condition) then you must feed a forage replacer instead.

Feed small meals

- Feeding large concentrate meals can increase the risk of colic as undigested starch may pass into the hind-gut where it is fermented by bacteria. This can impact the delicate balance

of hindgut microorganisms. For horses prone to colic you should ensure that they receive less than 1g per kg of bodyweight of starch per meal.

Provide digestive support

- Prebiotics and probiotics are commonly recommended for horses and ponies prone to colic for maintenance of a healthy digestive tract. Studies show that *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* yeast can support maintenance of a healthy pH and microflora population in the hindgut. Psyllium is a pro-kinetic and binds to sand particles, therefore supplementation may improve gut motility and help reduce the amount of sand particles in the gut, something that should always be considered if your horse is on a starvation paddock or kept on sandy paddocks.

Ensure a constant supply of fresh water

- Horses should have constant access to fresh, clean water. Reduced water intake can increase the risk of impaction colic. Cold water can trigger colic so it is important to ensure that you supply warm water in the winter. When transporting your horse it is important to have frequent 'water stops'. Some horses will not drink water when away from home; adding some apple juice or cordial will help to mask any unusual flavours.

Effective parasite control

- A parasite burden will increase the risk of spasmodic colic and some types of impaction colic. It is important that you regularly perform faecal worm egg counts. Remember some horses can appear healthy but may be carrying a large parasite burden including tapeworms, redworms and ascarids. You should speak to your vet to design an effective worming programme for your horse.

Regular dental care

- Poor teeth occlusion or a general lack of dental care can increase the risk of tympanic and impaction colic. Horses with poor teeth can often struggle to chew their forage properly. Therefore, it is important that your veterinary surgeon or qualified dental technician checks your horse's teeth regularly.

We are here to help!

If your horse has suffered from colic that required medical or surgical intervention then they may require a specialist diet whilst they recover and possibly thereafter. The best diet will depend on the type of colic your horse has had and you should discuss this with your vet or one of our nutritionists.

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