

Colic in Your Horse

The definition of colic is any type of abdominal pain. Although colic can originate from a multitude of sites in the abdomen, we generally associate it with gastrointestinal distress. It is one of the most common disorders presented to large animal veterinarians as well as one of the leading causes of death in horses. Signs of colic include decreased appetite, lethargy, decreased fecal production, pawing, looking at the side, lying down excessively and rolling or thrashing. To diagnostically approach colic in your horse, your veterinarian must determine if the clinical signs detected are intestinal or non-intestinal. Your veterinarian will also need to determine if colic is due to a small intestinal or large intestinal disorder.

If you suspect colic in your horse, immediate action should be taken. The first step is to call your veterinarian. Having answers to the following questions when you reach your veterinarian allows them to evaluate the severity of the colic episode and decide what action should be taken: signs of colic, heart rate (taken with a stethoscope just behind the left elbow or by palpating the pulse over an artery), respiratory rate, rectal temperature, gum color and refill time (by pressing your finger onto the gums and seeing how long it takes for the pink return), gastrointestinal sounds, fecal production and consistency, changes in environment or feed, and the insurance status of the horse. Normal temperature in an adult horse is 99-100.5°F. Normal heart rate is from 24-44 beats per minute. Respiratory rate in a healthy equine is from 12-36 breaths per minute. Do not give your horse medication without direct instructions by your veterinarian. Other important things to do when your horse exhibits signs of colic include removing all feed material, allowing access to water, moving the horse to a enclosed and well lighted area to ensure adequate observation, walking the horse if continually rolling or endangering itself (but do not overtire), allowing the horse to rest if quiet, and monitoring the horse closely until your veterinarian arrives.

Colic can resolve with medical treatment including fluid therapy, anti-inflammatory medications, and mineral oil by nasogastric intubation, or may need surgical intervention. The close observation of clinical signs and preparation of the owner can help to decrease the period of colic and to ensure adequate veterinary care is available. Your veterinarian should be able to assess the horse and determine what type of therapy is indicated. Early referral of horses that do not respond to treatment on the farm is critical to increase survivability.

Prevention of contributing factors and causes of colic can decrease the incidence rate. Important things to do for your horse include: maintain a strict daily routine, change diets gradually over a 7-10 day period, feed good quality hay and concentrate, limit the amount of grain fed to less than 50% of the diet, divide the daily concentrate fed into several small feedings throughout the day, keep your horses on a regular parasite control program, provide exercise daily, allow access to fresh water at all times. In Florida, it is also important to maintain your horse on a strict sand prevention program. We recommend avoiding feeding hay from the ground and instead feed hay from rubber mats at all times and giving a 99% psyllium product for 7 days in a row once monthly. These guidelines do not completely prevent the incidence of colic due to sand accumulation in the colon, but will help to decrease the risk.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email info@brandonequine.com with any questions regarding this topic.

Reference

1. AAEP. Colic: Minimizing its incidence and impact in your horse. Bayer, 2005.