

Colic in horses is defined as abdominal pain, but it is a clinical sign rather than a diagnosis. The term colic can encompass all forms of gastrointestinal conditions which cause pain as well as other causes of abdominal pain not involving the gastrointestinal tract. The most common forms of colic are gastrointestinal in nature and are most often related to colonic disturbance. There are a variety of different causes of colic, some of which can prove fatal without surgical intervention. Colic surgery is usually an expensive procedure as it is major abdominal surgery, often with intensive aftercare. Among domesticated horses, colic is a major cause of premature death. The incidence of colic in the general horse population has been estimated between 10-11% on an annual basis. It is important that any person who owns or works with horses be able to recognize the signs of colic and determine whether or not a veterinarian should be called.

Common Causes:

- Change in season (water temperature change)
- Sand in digestive tract (eating off sandy soil will accumulate sand in GI tract)
- Intestinal parasites

Clinical Signs:

- Refusing feed/hay
- Increased heart and respiration rate
- Sweating
- Looking at belly, looking uncomfortable
- Getting up & down frequently/restless
- Rolling violently
- Stretching out to urinate, but not urinating
- Kicking/biting at belly
- Absence/reduction of digestive sounds

When to Call Your Vet:

- If horse is showing any signs mentioned above (treatment plan or farm call can be coordinated at this time)
- If horse is still painful after pain medication and/or vet visit
- If horse is rolling/thrashing violently

Diagnosis: *based on several parameters*

- History of horse (feeding/deworming regimen, pasture type, previous colic, etc)
- Veterinary evaluation of heart/respiration rate and digestive sounds
- Rectal palpation
- Pass nasal-gastric tube to check for reflux (excessive fluid in stomach)
- Abdominocentesis (if necessary)
- Ultrasound abdomen (if necessary)
- Blood panel

Treatment:

- IV pain medication/sedation
- Pass NG tube to deliver water, oil & electrolytes
- IV fluids (if necessary)
- Surgery (in extreme cases)

Prognosis:

- Horses that are caught early generally do well with pain meds and time
- If the horse requires surgery, recovery time is longer and may require more strict management of the horse in future

Prevention:

- Observe water intake of horses. If temperature drops & horse decreases water intake, consider a water heater or adding salt to feed ration
- Keep horses on regular deworming program (ask about our PreventiCare program)
- If horse lives on sandy soil, consider regular use of a psyllium product to remove sand from digestive tract