



Colic

What is colic?

Colic is the veterinary term used to describe the clinical signs which indicate abdominal pain in the horse. Colic itself is not a specific disease. In many cases, the pain arises from distension of the intestine but from time to time, pain can come from another site within the abdomen.

What are the signs of colic?

Mild colic:

- Pawing the ground
- Turning the head to look at the flank
- Restlessness- lying down and getting up frequently
- Licking or biting at the belly
- Stretching out as if to pass urine

Severe colic:

- Violent rolling
- Sweating
- Lying on back
- Inability to stand
- Rapid breathing

What causes colic?

Commonly, changes in management, such as change in diet, exercise or amount of turnout can bring on colic symptoms and some conditions such as having a heavy burden of worms or poor teeth can predispose to certain types of colic. Spasmodic colic is the most common category of colic, and usually involves the horse having episodes of mild colic signs, with the vet's examination finding no serious abnormalities. Most of these cases respond to treatment well and resolve within a few hours often without the exact cause ever being able to be identified. However, links have been found with high levels of worm infestation, particularly tapeworm burden and changes in diet.

What will the vet do if my horse has colic?

When you call us we are likely to ask you some questions about what kind of symptoms the horse is showing to give us an idea of how much pain he/she is in. If the pain is very mild, we may suggest you take the horse out in hand to walk him/her for fifteen to twenty minutes. This depends on there being a suitable place to walk the horse as, clearly, going down on a concrete yard is likely to worsen the situation, a school or even the field is ideal. Do not allow your horse to eat at this time. Depending on how mild the signs are and how the horse responds to walking, some horses may require no veterinary attention and simply close monitoring from you in case the pain returns and then we need to attend. If you are unsure at all we would rather come out and see the horse even if it is just to put your mind at rest.

Horses showing more serious signs of pain can still be walked if it is safe to do so whilst we are on our way out to see them. That said, your safety is paramount in this situation! If the horse does attempt to roll then get him/her back to their feet if it is safe to do so but if the rolling is violent it is preferable to leave them in the stable until we arrive.

A normal examination of a horse with colic involves:

- Taking heart rate, temperature and respiratory rate. Heart rate often gives an additional indicator of pain level.
- Listening by stethoscope to the horse's gut sounds
- A rectal examination will usually be performed unless the patient is too small. Due to the anatomy of the horse, only around one third of the digestive tract can be felt through the rectum. However, this part of the examination can give a lot of information as to whether there are any parts of the intestine out of place, or impactions of the large intestine. Most horses are likely to require light sedation for this part, for both their safety and ours.

Dependent on the findings of the above examinations, we may also pass a stomach tube up the horse's nose and down the throat, take blood or take a sample of the fluid in the abdomen.

Now what?

We will discuss our findings fully with you and decide upon the most appropriate treatment. Mild colics often simply require medical management (administration of pain killing drugs), and close monitoring from yourself to check the pain does not return. We will normally recommend taking all food away for a short period of time. If the horse does not respond or shows more signs of pain then we will re-examine them as necessary.

A small number of the horses we see for colic do not respond to medical treatment or initially show signs suggesting they will require surgery. If we suspect surgical treatment might be necessary then we will refer your horse to either Edinburgh or Glasgow Vet School. The surgical procedure itself will of course differ depending on the cause of the colic but the surgeons at the hospitals will be best placed to talk you through each individual case. Clearly, colic surgery is not something to be taken lightly, but in most cases, it is the only chance the horse has for survival.

Will my horse be normal after surgery?

Statistics from the University of Liverpool Equine Hospital show approximately 85% of patients which survive surgery will be discharged from the hospital, normally after 7-10 days post surgery, if there are no complications. Further work from the University of Liverpool shows that the probability of the horse making a long-term recovery and returning to its purpose depends on many factors, and most importantly the level of endotoxaemia prior to surgery. Endotoxaemia occurs when the gut suffers an injury causing it to release potent toxins from inside the gut itself into the bloodstream. These toxins cause the horse to become systemically unwell with a drop in blood pressure and increased heart rate, and signs of being in septic shock. If there is any suggestion or evidence of endotoxaemia then quick referral is necessary as time from calling the vet, monitoring, loading and transport all take time. Thankfully, indications for surgery and rapid referral are very low.