

Equine Colic Fact Sheet

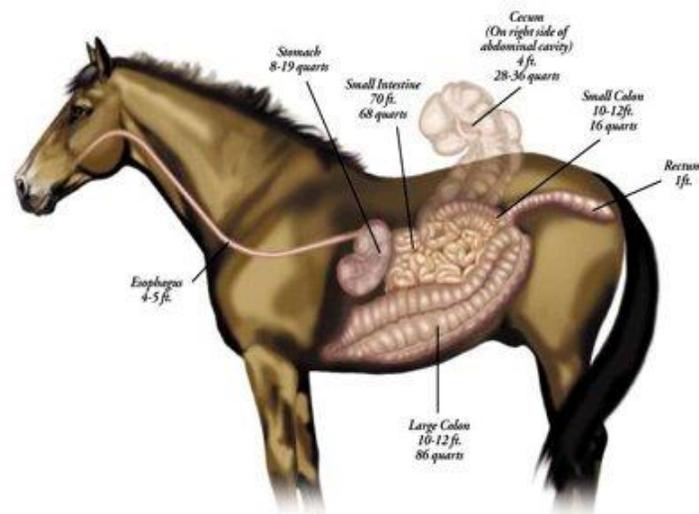
Hartwell Equine Veterinary Services

What Is Colic?

Colic is a collective term to refer to abdominal pain. It can be caused by many different things and there are many different types of colic.

Signs of Colic:

Horses may exhibit many signs of colic, including pawing, rolling, repeatedly lying down and getting up, sitting in a dog like position, kicking at the belly, and repeated flank watching. Horses can also become dull and disinterested in food.



Common Types of Colic:

1. Spasmodic: this occurs when the gut contracts in an abnormal manner, causing a spasm. This spasm results in pain, causing colic symptoms. This type of colic can be easy to treat.
2. Impaction: usually occurring in the large colon, this occurs when the intestine is blocked by a mass of food. Sometimes, the intestine becomes so blocked that surgery is needed.
3. Displacement: this occurs when one section of the GI tract moves to a different location in the abdomen. Generally, these are corrected by surgery.
4. Strangulation/Torsion: this occurs when a part of the bowel twists upon itself. This usually cuts off blood supply to the affected bowel. This is a very serious type of colic and requires surgery.

What to Do If Your Horse Is Colicking:

First things first, **CALL YOUR VET!** Although your horse may not appear alarmingly painful, even the worst scenario colics can start as minimally uncomfortable.

Do not administer banamine unless instructed to do so by your vet. When your vet arrives, they will want the most thorough and accurate exam, and prior banamine administration may interfere with this. And remember, banamine should NEVER be given intramuscular.

Remove your horse from feed and only allow them access to fresh, clean water. You can gently walk your horse and keep them moving if they are able to do so. If they are violently rolling, be careful to not get hurt.

The Colic Exam:

1. Physical Exam: Your vet will take the temperature, heart rate, and respiration of your horse. They will also look at the mucous membranes (gums) to assess color, moistness, and capillary refill time (how long it takes for color to return to the gums once they've been pressed on). Gut sounds will be assessed in the four quadrants of the abdomen, which include upper left, lower left, upper right, and lower right.
2. Nasogastric intubation: This is the passage of a stomach tube. Not only does this allow for fluid administration, it also lets your vet know if there is excess fluid in the stomach, referred to as reflux.
3. Rectal exam: This can help your vet determine the type of colic, and where it is located. Your vet can't feel the entire contents on the abdomen but can get a good idea of any problems in the caudal (near the tail) half of the abdomen.
4. Abdominocentesis: Commonly referred to as a "belly tap" this procedure isn't always performed in a colic exam. This procedure takes a sample of fluid from the belly, which can help determine cause and/or severity of colic. The fluid obtained can help indicate the health of the bowel in the abdomen.

Common Treatments:

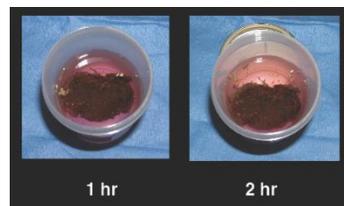
Water containing laxatives or electrolytes via nasogastric intubation.

Pain relief in the form of NSAIDs (banamine) and sedatives (xylazine, butorphanol, detomidine).

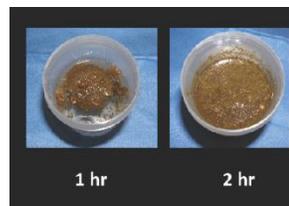
Anti-spasmodics (buscopan).

Common Colic Myths:

1. **Rolling will cause my horses intestines to twist:** horses out in the field commonly roll. If this were the case, normal, healthy horses would have twisted guts much more commonly.
2. **Mineral oil will clear an impaction:** mineral oil was commonly used as a colic treatment, but recent studies have proven that it cannot break down an impaction. In fact, mineral oil can bypass an impaction. Water has been shown to actually break down an impaction, as shown below. A fecal ball was placed in both mineral oil and water. After two hours, the fecal ball in the mineral oil had not dissolved, while the fecal ball in the water had.



Mineral Oil at 1 and 2 hours



Water at 1 and 2 hours

Prevention Tips:

1. Establish a daily routine and minimize stress.
2. Feed a high quality diet mainly comprised of roughage.
3. Divide larger feedings into smaller feedings throughout the day.
4. Consult your vet to set up a regular parasite control program.
5. Provide exercise or turnout on a daily basis.
6. Provide fresh, clean water at all times.
7. Avoid feeding on the ground in sandy soil areas.