

HOW TO COPE IF COLIC STRIKES

Dr Becky Lees
BVSc Cert AVP (EM) MRCVS

NET TEX



COMPLETE EQUINE CARE

HOW TO COPE IF COLIC STRIKES

The word 'colic' strikes fear into the hearts and minds of all horse owners. 10% of horses will suffer an episode of colic in their lives and it remains one of the biggest causes of death in horses worldwide.

Colic simply means 'pain in the abdomen' and therefore has many different causes. It can affect horses of all ages and types and can vary from a mild bout of discomfort that resolves by itself to something more serious that requires medical treatment or surgery in the most severe cases. It is difficult to know which colic case fits into which category as in the early stages the symptoms are the same (see below). It is vital that colic is always taken seriously, as survival rates are greatly improved with early treatment.

Experienced Equine Vet Dr Becky Lees has put together this guide to help you understand colic so that you can cope if the worst happens and colic strikes.

How do I recognise colic?

Symptoms of colic vary depending on the severity of pain that the horse is experiencing. Horses will typically display some or all of the following:



In mild cases:

- Lip curling.
- Belly watching.
- Restlessness.
- Pawing the ground.
- Poor appetite.
- Tooth grinding.
- Lying down more than normal.
- Changes in consistency of droppings.
- Passing less droppings than normal.

In moderate cases:

- Posturing to urinate frequently.
- Lying down and getting back up.
- Lying on their side for long periods.
- Kicking at their belly.
- Not passing droppings.

In severe cases:

- Violent rolling.
- Kicking out.
- Sweating.
- Groaning.
- Rapid breathing.
- Injuries to body and face from rolling and thrashing around.

What should you do if your horse has colic?

Call your vet immediately - colic is a true veterinary emergency and time is of the essence.

What Questions will your Vet ask?

Some of these may be asked on the phone or on arrival:

- How old is your horse?
- Any previous episodes of colic? And how did they resolve?
- How long has your horse been colicky for and when was he last seen 'normal'?
- What colic signs has your horse been showing?
- Has your horse passed any droppings, or how long ago did he last pass droppings?
- When did your horse last eat or drink?
- Have there been any changes in diet or management lately?
- Is your mare pregnant or if she has recently foaled, how long ago did she foal?
- What is your horse's worming history?

Colic Myth:

Stopping your horse from rolling will stop the gut from twisting.

It is not true that a horse can suffer a twisted gut by rolling however they can hurt themselves rolling, so walking them around is generally better, as long as it is safe to do so.

Before the Vet arrives:

- If you are alone, call a family member or friend to come and help you and give moral support.
- Take away any hay or other food present.
- Check that your horse is in a safe area, free from hazards. A large well bedded stable or an arena are ideal.
- If the symptoms are mild, walking gently may help, but follow your vet's advice and do not put yourself or the horse in danger of injury. Use a field or arena so that if your horse does go down or roll they won't hurt themselves. Don't attempt to walk a violent horse or constantly walk to the point of exhaustion.
- If your horse is anxious, rolling, or restless and is in a safe area, keep watching but do not interfere.
- Remove any droppings so that you can see if he passes any new droppings.
- If it is night time and lighting is limited try to find extra torches.
- Having a bucket of warm water ready can be useful.
- Do not give any painkillers or other drugs unless requested to do so by your vet.
- Make sure your horse's passport is present if possible.
- Make a plan of how you would transport your horse to a Veterinary Hospital if necessary.
- If the colic signs become very severe ring your Vet again and ask for further advice.

What are the types of colic?

There are many different types of colic that horses can suffer from. These are the most common:

- **Spasmodic colic:** This is the most common type of colic and happily responds well to simple treatment. It occurs either due to the build-up of gas within the horse's gut due to excess fermentation, or when the gut contracts in an abnormal manner creating painful spasms. It is commonly caused by a change of diet, a lack of roughage or parasites.
- **Impaction colic:** This is when a blockage occurs in the intestine causing constipation. Impactions typically occur in the large intestine and respond well to medical treatment in the form of pain relief, fluids and laxatives, but some cases will require surgery. If left untreated, severe impaction colic can be fatal. Impaction colics are most common in the winter months when horses are turned out less, exercised less, are fed a much drier diet (hay) and may not drink enough water.
- **Sand colic:** This is most typically seen in horses kept on sandy pastures. The horse accidentally eats sand while grazing which accumulates in the gut. It can lead to an impaction or it can irritate the lining of the bowel. Sand binding products can be fed to the horse to get rid of the sand and then the diet and/or pasture changed to avoid it reoccurring.

- **Displacements and Twisted gut:**

Displacements occur when one section of the gut moves to an abnormal location within the abdomen. Twists, also known as strangulations occur when the displaced piece of gut twists on itself cutting off the blood supply. This causes extreme pain as this area of the gut dies off and toxins are released into the bloodstream. Displacements and twists are uncommon but very serious in nature. Severe displacements and all twists require immediate surgery to correct the problem and save the horse.

The early stages of strangulating or displacement colics often present in a very similar manner to the more common, less life-threatening forms of colic – the major reason to take all colic episodes seriously and call the vet at the earliest signs of colic.

Helpful Hints

- ⚠ Early detection of colic will improve the chances of a successful outcome so know your horse's signs of good health. Be aware of temperature, pulse rate and respiratory rate.
- ⚠ Be especially vigilant with any horse that has a history of colic.

The normal TPR:

- Temperature: 37.5°C – 38.5°C
- Pulse: 25 - 45 beats per minute (depending on the horse's size, type and fitness)
- Respiratory Rate: 8 – 12 breaths per minute
- The gums should be pale pink and moist.

Is Colic My Fault?

This is a very common question and the answer is almost always no! It needs to be remembered that horses are predisposed to colic because of their anatomy and how their gut works. Follow our tips (below) to reduce the risk, however even the best kept and most well managed horse can get colic so don't beat yourself up if your horse does suffer an episode.



IMAGE: By Tim1965 - Own work, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4461272>

Reducing the Risk

There has been a lot of research into risk factors for colic, from this we have been able to identify steps that you can take to help reduce the risk of colic striking:

- Have a regular daily routine and make changes gradually.
- Allow as much turnout as possible.
- Do not overgraze pasture, especially if it is sandy.
- Ration any lush grass and treat it as a change in diet of the horse.
- Regular exercise.
- Gradual changes in the amount of exercise.
- Feed according to amount of exercise.
- Make any feed changes gradually.
- Regular dental checks and rasping.
- A regular deworming programme.
- Inedible bedding such as shavings if your horse eats its bed.
- A constant supply of fresh water.
- Enough forage (hay, haylage or grass), your horse's diet should consist of an absolute minimum of 60% forage.
- Ensure all feed and forage is good quality and not mouldy.
- Divide hard feed into small meals.
- Feed a pre and probiotic supplement during times of management change or feed changes to help the gut adapt and keep even sensitive tummies settled.

Helpful Hints

- ⚠ Monitor the amount of droppings your horse produces, so that you know what is normal and can detect a decrease in the production of droppings early on and seek veterinary attention.
- ⚠ Monitor your horse's water intake, as reduced water intake is a risk factor for all colics, especially impaction colic.

What are Pre and Probiotics?

A huge population of 'friendly' bacteria live in the horse's hind gut. When a horse's diet is changed these bugs have to adapt to the new diet. Sudden dietary changes can upset the 'good' bugs and lead to an increase in the 'bad' bugs which can lead to digestive upsets and colic.

Probiotics are live 'friendly' bacteria that are given orally in a supplement. The most common equine probiotic is *Saccharomyces Cerevisiae*. They help boost the numbers of 'friendly' bacteria and re-balance the gut. Prebiotics are substances that are an energy source for the 'friendly' bacteria to promote their numbers and growth. Typical equine prebiotics include Diamond V, mannan & fructo oligosaccharides, Brewer's yeast & psyllium. Look for a supplement containing both pre and probiotics, such as Nettex Gut Balancer.

Nettex Gut Balancer

Nettex Gut Balancer is an advanced prebiotic and probiotic supplement that uses the highest-grade ingredients including *Saccharomyces Cerevisiae*, Brewer's yeast, psyllium, FOS and MOS, plus Diamond V, a unique prebiotic which is a blend of multifunctional metabolite compounds that has been shown to have a positive effect on nutrient digestibility*. Nettex Gut Balancer is also blended with an appropriate vitamin and mineral package, whey protein, rice bran oil and selected micro-nutrients to offer overall health and wellbeing.

Suitable for horses and ponies of any age, type or breed, Nettex Gut Balancer will help keep the gut healthy and functioning at its best all year round. Maintaining a healthy digestive system is the key to preventing digestive problems.

