

## Fact Sheet

# Equine Colic

### What is colic?

Colic is the term used to describe the clinical signs that are demonstrated by a horse in response to abdominal pain.

Mild signs of colic may be restlessness, tail swishing, flank watching or kicking at the abdomen. Horses with more severe signs of abdominal pain may show prolonged periods of recumbency or demonstrate frequent rolling.

Just as abdominal pain in humans may have many causes, the same is true in the horse. In most cases, signs are mild to moderate and will self-correct. In other cases, colic may be associated with a more serious condition that may require surgery to save the horse's life. Sadly, some cases may be fatal.

### Clinical signs of equine colic

Signs of colic are most commonly caused by problems in the gastrointestinal tract, and most frequently involve a form of obstruction:

- Flank watching
- Lying down and/or rolling
- Pawing the ground
- Kicking their abdomen
- Stretching
- Reduced or no passing of droppings
- Lack of interest in food

It is important that all horses exhibiting signs of abdominal pain should be examined by a veterinary surgeon as a matter of urgency to allow a prompt diagnosis as some patients deteriorate rapidly.



### Trigger factors

Studies have shown that an increased risk of colic can be due to the following:

- Recent change in hard feed or hay/haylage
- Change in level of exercise
- Reduced water intake
- Changes in turnout/stabling
- Poor dentition
- Lack of parasite control
- Cribbing/windsucking
- Change in weather



# Equine Colic | Fact Sheet

## How is equine colic diagnosed?

When the vet arrives, they will perform a thorough examination of your horse. They will usually check the following, if it is safe to do so:

- Heart rate – this is a useful indicator of the severity of the systemic shock. A mild elevation in heart rate is common with pain but a greater elevation in heart rate may indicate that the horse is cardiovascularly compromised
- Abdominal auscultation - generally, the quieter the gut sounds the more serious the problem
- Rectal temperature – If the horse's temperature is elevated this may indicate inflammation or an infection
- Faeces – the vet will check faeces for consistency, blood, worms, sand and mucous

The vet may also perform further tests and examinations including:

- Rectal palpation
- Passing a nasogastric tube into the stomach
- Blood test
- Ultrasonography of the abdomen
- Peritoneal tap - the sterile collection of peritoneal fluid

### Referral to a Hospital

While the majority of colic cases can be treated at home with pain relief and other medication and treatments, some horses will require referral to an equine veterinary hospital for more involved medical treatment or surgery.



## How to prevent equine colic

- Maintain a feeding routine – do not suddenly change the feed and introduce new feed slowly
- Ensure your horse always has access to fresh clean water
- Have a targeted worming plan set up for your horse
- Regular dental checks at least once a year by your vet or qualified equine dental technician
- Regular exercise which includes turn out or ridden or in-hand exercise

For further information, please contact your local VetPartners Equine Veterinary Practice on:

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