

Colic Prevention

Tips for avoiding and treating colicky situations.

By Toots A. Banner, DVM

It's 2 am., and you're awakened by a loud noise at the barn. Panic hits as you drag yourself out of bed, and you hope your horse hasn't become colicky and is now thrashing in the stall. As you near the barn, you see him lying down, covered with shavings and obviously distressed. You know you treat your horse with a daily dose of tender love and care, so how could this colic have happened? And what do you do now?

While You Wait

As you take your horse out of the stall, should you walk him until the veterinarian arrives? Should you put him in a round pen and keep him at a trot? Can he become worse if he rolls? Unfortunately, there are no clear answers but some guidelines that should be considered. Let's compare your horse to a person with severe abdominal cramps. Normally, a person would seek a comfortable couch or bed and try to find a position that minimizes the pain.

In many cases, a colicky horse is trying to find a comfortable position. If the horse is lying quietly, either on its side or sitting up sternally, let him relax. This might be in contrast to what you have heard over the years, but lying down is acceptable, and it is unlikely your horse will twist the intestines by rolling. Remember: horses dealt with colic before domestication. Their actions of lying down and rolling are natural – not suicidal.

Unfortunately, some colics continue for hours with significant pain. This means the horse needs to tap into all his energy and endurance, and walking him for an extended period of time can reduce his strength needed to survive. If the horse is rolling violently, he should be walked slowly, but do not excessively whip the horse to get him up or to keep him moving. Remember that when a horse is rolling, his main focus is not on the environment or on the handler. He can lie down next to a fence or trailer and get a leg caught underneath or roll against the handler and cause significant harm to the person trying to care for him.

Hopefully, by now the veterinarian has arrived and has begun treatment on your horse. You then get a chance to catch your breath and consider what caused this colic. Was it something your horse ate or didn't eat? Was it something you did wrong? Were the moon and stars lined up in the wrong orbits? Or was it just plain bad luck? Why was your horse one of the just over 4 percent of horses that colic annually in the U.S.?

Water Wash

Colicky horses frequently suffer from reduced water intake. Because horses are primarily made of water, drinking less water makes the feed and hay mixture in the intestine thicker. The 100 feet of intestine in your horse has many turns and changes in diameter, and it makes the horse more prone to having that mixture get “stuck” or impacted. The impactions usually consist of coarse hay or sand, but not always. Providing plenty of clean, fresh water is the first step in reducing colic. I also recommend adding electrolytes to grain. In Southern states, add one ounce of electrolytes twice daily during summer months and once daily in winter.

Forage O' Plenty

Horses have evolved eating frequent meals of quality pasture grass. This frequent grazing promotes digestive health and supplies the fiber requirements in the intestinal tract. As a general rule, a 1,000-pound horse on a tradition hay and grain diet should consume around 2 percent of his body weight, or 20 pounds of roughage per day. This roughage has many positive attributes in maintaining your horse's internal health. First, the fiber is the natural stimulant in the large colon for normal peristalsis. Digestible fiber is necessary as a source of energy for microorganisms in your horse's cecum and large colon, and it provides a source of dietary energy for the horse. Indigestible fiber is also necessary and required for the maintenance of normal gastrointestinal pH, function and motility.

In addition to these factors, feeding adequate amounts of hay or roughage and feeding at frequent intervals can decrease aberrant behavior such as chewing up board fences, cribbing or eating potentially toxic, colic-causing weeds. Due to overgrazing, bad teeth, allergies, use (such as stalled, athletic horses) and injuries, pasture grazing is not always available, so it is important to provide adequate roughage to these horses through alternative sources. Alternative sources include quality hay, hay cubes, dengie products (chopped, bagged forage), Spillers/Seminole Showing Chaff and Spillers/Seminole Happy Hoof.)

Impacted Sand

Quality and sufficient roughage might reduce chances of your horse developing gastric ulcers and eating sand or dirt (also called pica). Sufficient roughage intake is far more important in the prevention of sand colic than bran/oil mashes and psyllium products. Think about the bulk roughage of 20 pounds of hay versus 8 ounces of psyllium as it moves through the intestine.

Horses normally ingest sand as they pick up grain, pellets or hay, or as they graze off sandy soil. Weanlings, yearlings, and sometimes nursing foals are more inclined to eat sand preferentially. Always feed horses in an

environment where the grain, pellets or hay leaves fall on a firm surface. If you feed outside, arrange a harder surface (such as rubber mats) underneath the feeder. Allow horses to graze only in pastures with adequate growth so that ingestion of sand is minimal. Feed horses grain and hay before turnout, so they are not so hungry, which might reduce them ripping up the grass with the sandy roots. Several clinical signs might tip you off to excessive sand ingestion in your horse. In about one third of affected horses, a persistent diarrhea develops before the onset of colic symptoms. The sand is gritty and irritating, which abrades the lining of the intestinal tract, impairing absorption of nutrients and fluids, causing diarrhea to develop.

Supplements & Additives

Feed additives are another way to reduce the incidence of colic by promoting digestive health and efficiency. Probiotics (which mean “for life”) and yeast cultures place microorganisms in the intestine that improve digestive efficiency and correct imbalances that could be present. As researchers learn more about equine digestion, probiotics and yeast culture are consistently connected to improved health.

Amending the Diet

Diet can be a huge factor in colic prevention. Abruptly changing grain types increase risk. Any dietary changes should be made over a five- to seven- day period, adding a little more of the new grain to a little less of the old grain daily. This allows adequate time for the digestive tract and microorganisms to adjust to the new source of nutrients. When horses are introduced to new pasture, they go through the same adjustment period as with grain. Allow 30 minutes grazing time on day one, one hour on day two, and so on. Fertilized pastures with lush, green grasses are the most dangerous and can cause grass colic as well as grass founder.

Lock the Door

Colic caused by horses overeating grain is preventable and management-related. Make it impossible for your horse to get into the feed room by latching the door securely.

Ingesting large amounts of grain can overwhelm the digestive tract and lead to two very serious conditions – colic and laminitis. Both can be fatal. Overeating grain can take several hours before real symptoms show up, so don’t hesitate to call the veterinarian immediately. A veterinarian should administer medication to reduce the intestine’s ability to absorb potentially life-threatening endotoxins.

Twisted Intestine

Twists (volvulus), strangulations and entrapments are the most menacing

forms of colic. In these situations, no amount of walking will help. The only treatment is surgery, which must be performed as soon as possible for a good chance of survival. No one knows what causes these forms of colic. For years, horse owners thought it resulted when horses rolled on their backs, but researchers discovered this is seldom the cause, because your horse rolls virtually every day. Research shows that when twists are involved, they usually occur before the horse ever lies down and rolls. In other words, if the horse requires surgery and you insist on walking it for several hours before calling for veterinary help, you might literally be walking the horse to death.

Colic is a serious, sometimes fatal situation, and every horse owner wants to minimize its chances. Provide plenty of clean, fresh water and electrolytes daily. Give adequate amounts of quality roughage, probiotics and periodic laxatives. Exercise daily, make feed changes slowly and check for sand every two weeks. Deworm on a regular schedule, feed horses away from sandy areas, and keep that feed room locked.

While there are no guarantees, good management will help you avoid this frightening problem.

Sand Test

A simple test can be performed to monitor for signs of sand buildup. Take four to six fecal balls from the middle of a fresh manure pile. Mix with a quart of water in a clear container and shake. Once the solid material precipitates out (5-10 minutes), measure the sand in the bottom of the container. More than one teaspoon is considered abnormal. The presence of any sand is a cause for concern, and sand preventative measures should be implemented on a regular basis. Feeding off the sand and properly feeding roughage is the best management strategy to limit the sand burden in your horse's intestine.