

Colic in Horses

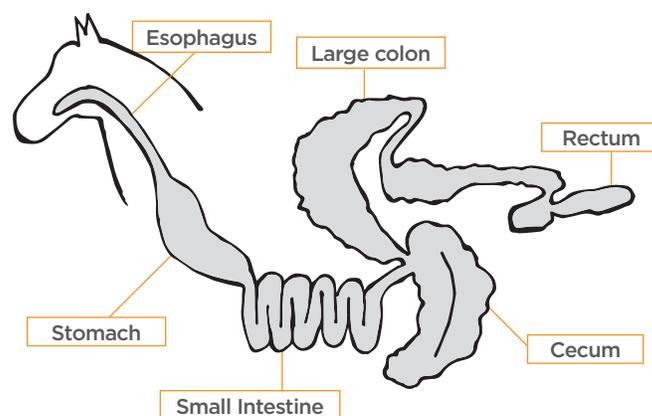
LARGE ANIMAL EMERGENCY & CRITICAL CARE

First of all, what IS colic and what makes it so important?

Colic is a severe, often fluctuating, pain in the abdomen. It is generally associated with gastrointestinal (GI) pain, but other things may look like colic too. Colic is the most common emergency in equine practice, and it can be a life-threatening condition! Depending on what is CAUSING their pain, and how LONG it has been going on, a horse's prognosis can vary from a high likelihood of survival to a serious and potentially fatal situation. This is why it is EXTREMELY important to call your veterinarian as soon as you suspect that your horse could be suffering from colic, because early diagnosis and treatment could be the difference between life and death of the horse!

What CAUSES colic?

The GI tract can be divided into 2 main parts (based on location): small and large intestinal. The small intestinal portion involves the segment of intestine from the stomach to the cecum. It begins with the duodenum and ends with the ileum (Figure 1). The ileum then enters the cecum, and continues as the large intestine, also known as the colon (Figure 1). Colic can result from a wide variety of issues, including but not limited to gas or impaction, a blockage, thickened intestinal walls, torsion (twisting) and more! Anything causing the intestines to stop or slow movement will prevent ingesta (food) from moving out of the body and cause a serious situation. Torsion is an especially dangerous condition, because it prevents that portion of intestine from getting adequate blood supply and oxygen, which would not only cause necrosis (death) of that piece of intestine, but could potentially lead the horse to become septic (toxins in the bloodstream traveling throughout the body and damaging the organs).



What can the veterinarian do to help my horse with colic?

Only 7-10% of colic cases actually require surgery. The majority of colic can be managed medically/conservatively either on the farm, by the owner, or in a hospital, depending on severity. Veterinarians are trained to be able to recognize signs of colic, and if necessary, perform diagnostic tests to help tell them whether the animal needs surgery or not. To help determine whether the horse's condition is serious enough to warrant being transferred to a hospital, the veterinarian will carry out a thorough physical exam, and depending on the condition of the horse, perform a rectal exam and pass a nasogastric tube to make sure fluid is not accumulating in the stomach. Your veterinarian may also perform an ultrasound or bloodwork. With EARLY diagnosis and treatment, chances of success increase dramatically! If you can catch the problem before it causes extensive damage, your horse has a much better prognosis overall, and you may be able to avoid expensive and invasive surgery.

How do I know if my horse has colic?

Any signs of discomfort in your horse could be caused by colic, but here are some basic signs to look for if you are suspicious:

- Restlessness and pawing at the ground
- Sweating and increased breathing rate
- Irritated kicking at the stomach
- Stretching as if to urinate
- Rolling or attempting to roll
- Lack of appetite

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Until the veterinarian arrives, here are some basic tips to keep you and your horse as safe as possible:

- Remove feed and hay from the horse
- Check to make sure the horse is in a safe area, free from hazards
- If your horse is anxious, rolling, or restless and is in a safe area such as a large stable or corral, keep watching but do not interfere
- Do not give any medications without consulting your veterinarian first.
- If the symptoms are mild, walking gently may help, but follow your veterinarian's advice and do not put yourself or the horse in danger of injury!

What are some of the risk factors for colic?

- Digestive disorder such as tooth problems, worm burdens and gut damage (including previous colic surgery)
- Poor feeding regime: soiled food, inappropriate quantities, lack of fiber and/ or water, or a sudden change in diet
- Stress such as hard exercise while unfit or after eating, travelling, sudden change of routine or environment
- Poor and over-grazed pasture, especially if the soil is sandy

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Veterinary-guided health care can increase your horse's chances for a long and healthy life. UTCVM's Equine Wellness 365 program provides your horse's basic veterinary and preventative health care needs and provides a colic protection plan in the event that your horse requires surgery for an intestinal or abdominal colic. Regular visits with a veterinarian help prevent problems and can help detect a minor condition before it becomes a complicated and more expensive issue. If your horse needs colic surgery while you are enrolled in Equine Wellness 365, UTCVM will cover up to \$5,000 of the cost of treatment at our Equine Hospital.

This comprehensive program includes all of the components for your horse's overall wellbeing: a yearly physical exam, vaccinations*, parasite evaluation, and dental care along with expert advice on good nutrition and exercise. You can either bring your horse to our Equine Hospital, or have our Field Service veterinarians come to your farm. Please note that farm call fees are not included in the enrollment fee.

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Equine Wellness 365 Requirements:

- Enrollment and coverage begins at the time of physical examination and runs for 365 days from that time.
- The Equine Wellness 365 introductory enrollment fee (call for current cost) covers all of the program benefits outlined in the components section. Farm trip fees are not included. Additional services, office calls, optional vaccines or other needs are billed out at regular client rates.
- Clients must remain in good financial standing with UTCVM to enroll and be maintained in the program.
- Horse must be older than 1 year to participate in the program.
- Horse cannot have had abdominal surgery within one year of enrollment.
- If your horse has never been vaccinated, it will require an initial series of vaccinations with boosters 3-6 weeks later. The booster vaccinations and associated costs are not included in this program.
- Plan fee must be paid in full at time of enrollment. No refunds or substitutions.