



## **COLIC FACTSHEET**

Colic simply put is pain in the abdomen. Commonly this pain originates from the guts but don't forget there are other structures in there too such as reproductive and urinary tract organs.

### **Symptoms**

These are very variable but can range from a bit quiet and not eating through to violently rolling. Pawing at the ground, kicking at their belly, looking at their flanks, sweating, lying down and reduced faeces can all be indicators of colic.

### **What should you do if you suspect colic?**

If you suspect colic call your Vet without delay. Remove any food but leave water available. You can walk them gently (if it is safe to do so) but it is important not to exhaust them. The important thing is you do not get injured as a severely painful horse may not behave like their usual self.

### **What is the vet going to examine?**

**1) Check the heart rate** – the normal heart rate is 30- 40 beats per minute, this will increase with pain. In general the higher the heart rate the more concerning the colic.

**2) Check the breathing (respiratory) rate** – normal is 8-12 breaths per minute. Pain can cause this to increase.

**3) Take your horses temperature** – normal is 38°C. A fever may indicate peritonitis (infection or inflammation in the abdomen).

**4) Look at gum colour** – normal is salmon pink. If the gum colour has turned red or purple this is a worrying sign that there could be something serious going on such as a twisted gut.

**5) Listen for gut sounds** – too noisy can be an indication of a spasmodic colic. Too quiet or absent can be an indicator the guts aren't working as well as they should be.

**Based on the initial examination, your Vet may decide to do some more tests. Not every test will be done in every case.**

**1) Rectal examination** – your Vet is feeling for any thing out of the ordinary – such as gas distension in the intestines, impactions (food blockage), displacements or torsions (twisted gut).

**2) Stomach tubing** – this can look really unpleasant – it consists of a long tube being passed up the nose, down the oesophagus into the stomach. Horses cannot vomit, so it tells you if there is a buildup of fluid in the stomach called reflux. Lots of reflux (over 2 litres) is a worrying sign. Stomach tubing can also be used as part of the treatment, as fluids can be given via the tube directly into the stomach; this may be appropriate with impactions.

**3) Belly tap** – a small area is prepared (cleaned) and a needle is inserted to obtain a sample of peritoneal fluid (this is fluid surrounding the intestines and organs in the abdomen). This sample can be useful in guiding prognosis. Normal colour is clear straw yellow. If it turns red or cloudy it gives cause for concern.

**4) Ultrasound scan** - the scanner is used to look for gas distension of intestines that are out of reach on rectal examination, it also looks for gut movement. This is usually performed externally through the abdominal wall.

**What next?**

All these are part of a jigsaw puzzle and put together can help your Vet decide the best treatment plan. It is important to decide early on whether it is possible to treat your horse on the yard or whether they need more intensive care or surgery in a specialist hospital. The majority of cases will be treated on the yard but there are those that need to be hospitalised.

It is important that the decision to go to surgery is made without undue delay. There are lots of factors to consider when deciding if you should put your horse through colic surgery that can be discussed with your vet. Unfortunately this decision has to be made quickly and often in the middle of the night, so it is worth thinking about it now, as a hypothetical situation, just in case. The average cost of surgery is £5000-7000.

The better news is that approximately only 10% of colic cases will require surgery and colic surgery is successful in approximately 75% of cases!

**Remember colic can be potentially life threatening, so if you spot the symptoms call your Vet without delay.**