



# Colic

## What is colic?

Colic is just a word used to describe abdominal pain, which is usually due to problems in the gastrointestinal tract. The severity of colic can vary from mild to severe and colic is one of the most common causes of death in horses. Any horse showing symptoms of colic requires immediate veterinary attention as early diagnosis and treatment is one of the most important factors for giving horses the best chance of recovery.

## What are the symptoms of colic?

- Pawing
- Rolling
- Flank watching
- Sweating
- Breathing rapidly
- Lying down frequently and getting back up
- Lying flat out on their side for long periods
- Posturing as if to urinate but not urinating
- Lip curling



## How is colic treated?

Initially the vet will examine your horse and inject him/her with a pain reliever. The vet may also sedate your horse to perform a rectal examination and then may pass a tube up your horse's nose and into his/her stomach (a nasogastric tube). In severe colic, the nasogastric tube may show the presence of "reflux", which is a build up of fluid in the stomach. Horses cannot vomit, so a build up of fluid could be potentially fatal if it caused the stomach to rupture. In certain types of colic, such as impactions, the vet may give your horse fluids via the nasogastric tube to ensure your horse remains well hydrated and to help clear the impaction.

## What if my horse needs to come into Leahurst?

If the vet thinks that your horse may need surgery or further investigations (eg, abdominal ultrasound), he/she will advise referral to the Philip Leverhulme Equine Hospital at Leahurst. Just because the vet advises referral does not necessarily mean your horse will have to have surgery – it may be that an abdominal ultrasound is required to confirm what's happening in your horse's abdomen, or it may be that your horse needs frequent monitoring, IV fluid therapy and intensive care, which the hospital can provide to a very high standard.

## What if my horse needs surgery?

In around 10% of cases, surgery is needed to save the horse's life. This is an important decision and can be a very difficult decision to make at the time because emergency situations are usually very stressful.

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## What if my horse needs surgery? (continued)

Whilst you will receive advice at the time on the costs, aftercare and prognosis, we advise all owners that you think about and plan in advance what you would want to do in an emergency so if an emergency does occur, you are already aware of your wishes and any financial aspects relevant to the situation. The hospital at Leahurst is one of the world's leading centres for equine colic surgery and has an experienced team of specialist equine surgeons, medics and anaesthetists available 24/7, 365 days a year, so you can rest assured that your horse is in the best possible hands if he or she does require surgery.

## Is there anything I can do to prevent colic?

Studies have shown many contributing causes to colic, including high parasite levels (worm burdens), sudden management changes and poor dentition (painful teeth lead to less chewing, larger length of fibres in the gastro-intestinal tract, higher likelihood of colic).

There are, unfortunately, still many cases where horses colic without any known risk factors or inciting cause and therefore it is not possible to completely prevent colic, though there are some things you can do to minimise the risk of colic developing:

- Ensure a constant supply of fresh, drinkable water (in winter check troughs & buckets are not frozen)
- Keep feeding, turnout and exercise routines as consistent as possible – particularly over holiday periods as this is when routines are most likely to change.
- Any dietary changes should be made gradually over 2-3 weeks (there is a greater risk of colic within 7-14 days after dietary change)
- If changing premises for a few days, take your horse's usual feed and hay with you
- Sudden increases in stabling time can increase the risk of colic occurring – this is a risk over winter as severe weather can prevent turn out. If you do need to stable your horse suddenly, ensure he/she has plenty of fresh water, isn't over-indulging on hay or haylage and their faecal output is normal.
- Keep worm levels low – regular faecal egg counts, regular poo-picking of paddocks, tapeworm testing.
- Regular dental checks – at least every 12 months. Our vets all perform routine dental examinations and rasping on-yard or at Leahurst, please contact us for more information.

If you have any questions about worming or your horse's management, please contact us. If you would like more information on colic, please visit <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/equine/common-conditions/colic/>.

**If you suspect your horse has colic, please call us immediately on 0151 794 6199**

**Please contact us if you would like more information.**