

COLIC INFORMATION SHEET

Colic is a broadly used term to describe any type of abdominal discomfort or pain, from a mild impaction to a life-threatening intestinal torsion. It is estimated that 1 in 10 horses will suffer an episode of colic this year and, as every horse owner knows, colic is the leading cause of death among equine. The main symptoms include pawing at the ground, looking at or biting the flanks, getting up and lying down, rolling, thrashing and sweating. An incident can be brought on by many different factors, including recent stabling changes, poor parasite control, irregular feeding practices, contaminated feed or illnesses that may compromise gut motility.

In 1998, The United States Department of Agriculture's National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) conducted a study on the causes and effects of colic. They monitored 1,026 horse operations in 28 states from the Spring of 1998 to the Spring of 1999. From the data collected they were able to draw some of the following conclusions:

- ◆ Foals less than six months old were less likely to colic than all other age groups.
- ◆ Horses 18 months to 5 years old were slightly more prone to colic than other age groups.
- ◆ A change in diet in the two weeks preceding a colic episode (particularly a change in hay) was cited in 15% of cases.
- ◆ Horses with a previous history of colic, especially abdominal surgery, were predisposed to further attacks.
- ◆ Geographic regions had no bearing on incidence rates.

The following are some general guidelines to help prevent or minimize colic attacks:

1. Feed hay before grain since hay is digested quicker than grain. Feeding hay after grain can lead to undigested grain getting pushed through the stomach and small intestine too quickly.
2. Make any changes in forage or the type of hay as gradual as possible. A sudden change can upset the PH balance of a horse's gut.
3. Do not allow your horse to graze in high traffic horse areas such as fairgrounds or horse-oriented roadside rest stops. A horse can pick up enough parasites in these high traffic spots in only fifteen minutes to cause an episode of colic.
4. Keep your horse away from pastures that have been fertilized with a synthetic fertilizer for at least two months. This also includes any pastures that are susceptible to fertilizer runoff. The various chemicals in the fertilizer can cause gastroenteritis.
5. Feed many small meals rather than a couple of large ones. The equine digestive system has a much more difficult time breaking down feed in large meals. Consequently some of it may reach the intestines undigested.
6. Provide ample turnout and minimize stall time.
7. Make sure your horse has access to a clean water source. Horses need six to ten gallons of water a day.
8. Use only top quality feeds and buy from mills that routinely test for mycotoxins. Purchase hay from reputable dealers. Make sure they contract with producers who use cutting and conditioning practices that minimize mold growth and/or blister beetle infestation.
9. Ask your veterinarian to provide a regular parasite prevention program.
10. Keep your horse's teeth in good condition. Problems with teeth can lead to poor chewing and digestion.
11. Keep feed off the ground and avoid turning horses out in overgrazed paddocks with a sandy soil base. Ingested sand can settle at the bottom of the intestines becoming an irritant.
12. Minimize stresses that come with major changes in a horse's environment

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