

Horse Colic - Serious but Easily Prevented

Colic is the most important horse illness in terms of: - It is the most frequent cause of pre-mature death of horses - It is the most common cause of serious illness, with at least 1 in 10 horses getting it each year - It is the biggest single cause of large veterinary bills (into thousands of dollars) - It sometimes results in other serious illnesses (e.g. laminitis or founder)

Colic is not a single illness but rather a group of related illnesses affecting the digestive system. As such, there are many different types of horse colic and various different causes. Extensive research, covering thousands of case studies, has identified the main causes of the various types of colic. Following is a list of actions to avoid the primary causes of colic and thereby greatly reduce the risk of your horse developing colic.

- 1) Frequent Feedings. Horses have evolved to graze throughout the day. The more frequently they eat, the healthier their digestive system.
- 2) Grass before Grain. The equine digestive system is designed for 'high volume, low calorie' food such as grass or hay. Energy-dense foods such as grain or musli have insufficient volume and fiber. Consequently, the diet should have as much grass or hay as possible. If one feeds both hay and grain, one should feed the hay followed by the grain rather than the reverse order, as this results in better digestion and less bolting.
- 3) Soak Pellets. Pelleted food (e.g. hay pellets) should be soaked before feeding. This prevents bolting and choke. In addition, unsoaked pellets can greatly expand when they enter the stomach, resulting in bloating.
- 4) Protect Feed. Horses sometimes get into a feedroom and eat excessive quantities of food. Especially in the case of grain and related feeds, this can result in colic. It can also result in laminitis. Keeping the feedroom locked or using a horse-proof latch is wise.
- 5) Prevent Bolting. A horse may bolt (swallow without chewing) its food, potentially resulting in colic. This may be simply greed or a bad habit, but can also be due to medical issues such as dental problems. If your horse bolts, discuss with your vet how to correct this problem.
- 6) Dirt and Sand. Horses that ingest large amounts of dirt or sand are likely to develop impaction colic, especially if they have a low-fiber diet. Do not feed your horse on a sandy or dirty surface. Avoid putting them on over-grazed pastures, as they will ingest earth on such pastures.
- 6) Sufficient Water. A horse needs to drink adequate water throughout the day. During winter their water should be warmed as horses often don't drink sufficient water if it is too cold. After exercise, let them drink but limit the quantity until they have cooled down.
- 7) Worming. Horses which are wormed regularly (3-4 times/year) are less likely to develop colic. All the horses on a given pasture should be wormed at the same time to prevent cross-reinfection. Horses which have not been wormed for a long time can get colic when wormed due to an excessive worm population, so they should be given a laxative a few days before to first reduce the quantity of worms.
- 8) Regular Exercise. Horses with insufficient exercise are more prone to colic. When starting an exercise regime, start gradually as rapid changes in the amount of exercise can result in colic.
- 9) Eating Bedding. Many horses eat bedding, particularly straw bedding. If your horse ingests a large amount of bedding, especially inedible beddings (such as wood shavings), change to a bedding type which they don't eat.
- 10) Cold. Although horses can tolerate a fair amount of cold, if they become chilled (drop in body temperature) they are likely to develop colic. This is particularly likely to occur when there is a sudden drop in temperature after a relatively mild period. Avoid these by allowing your horse to develop a winter coat and/or protecting it with a rug. Especially during wet and windy weather, the horse should be protected from excessive cold.

About the Author

This [Horse Colic](#) article was written by Dr. Doug Stewart. At [Horse Care](#) other articles by the same author can be found.

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