

Understanding Colic - Causes and Prevention

by Jim Ward, D.V.M.

As an equine veterinarian, I have treated thousands of colic cases throughout my career. My job is to not only define the causes of colic, but also to educate horse owners on colic prevention. Please read through the following risk factors and prevention recommendations to see how your management practices fall within the colic prevention guidelines.

Together - we can eradicate colic!

Colic Risk Factors

- Recent change in diet - concentrate and/or hay
- History of previous episodes of colic
- Horses stabled as opposed to pasture - housing changes
- Inconsistency and poor quality of deworming program

Colic Prevention Guidelines

- 1. Practice Good Parasite Control-** For the best results, follow this purge deworming program with daily administration of pyrantel (Strongid C).
- 2. Regular Dental Care-** A horse's teeth need to be floated annually. Grinding of grain contributes to reduced particle size and allows for salivation, with amylase aiding in the digestive process. Hay needs to be chewed thoroughly in order to aid the prevention of impaction.
- 3. Grain or Concentrate-** Feed a grain or concentrate that minimizes starch content (low nonstructural carbohydrate - a starch measurement in feed) and includes other energy sources such as fat and digestible fiber. Always feed grains/concentrates at least twice a day and never feed more than 0.5% of body weight at any one feeding.
- 4. Quality Feed and Hay-** Meeting your horse's nutritional requirements with a high quality feed and hay will help you meet all of your horse's needs for energy, reproduction, performance and overall health. Consult your local feed dealer, the internet, extension agent and your local feed company representative for information on feeding assessments.
- 5. Timing of Feeding-** Meals should be evenly spaced and if a meal is late, never feed more to make up for it. It is better to feed a little more hay and even reduce the amount of concentrate for that meal.
- 6. Hay/pasture-** Horses colic less on pasture. It allows them to graze continually and also provides exercise.
- 7. Individual Feeding-** Feeding horses

individually in stalls, pens, or by tying the horse up is an ideal situation. This way they can be fed according to body weight and condition without fear of competition.

- 8. Dietary Changes-** If you are going to make a change in diet, gradually increase the new feed mixed in with the old feed over a 7-10 day period.
- 9. Water-** Fresh clean water is imperative. Decreased water consumption will contribute to impaction in the colon and cecum
- 10. Moldy Feed/Hay/Toxic Plants-** Moldy feedstuffs should be avoided. Careful inspection of feed and hay is a must.
- 11. Foreign Material, Sand, Wood, Bedding etc.-** Indigestible materials will create problems if ingestion is significant. Sand is a problem when horses spill feed and attempt to eat it off the ground. Sand accumulates in the intestinal tract and will cause colic.
- 12. Blister Beetles-** These are found in fields of alfalfa and are extremely toxic to horses causing a severe colic. Alfalfa that is from a 1st or 2nd cutting is the safest.
- 13. Exercise-** Feeding should be at least 2 hours prior to or after exercise. Grain feeding should be withheld 8 hours prior to strenuous exercise; hay should be given in small portions in multiple feedings the day of the event
- 14. Cooling Out-** If a horse is exercising, do not water until the horse is cooled out. Offer water in small amounts, 1 gallon at a time; offer more in 10 minute intervals.
- 15. Weigh Horses and Feed-** Horses should be weighed, preferably by scale. Feed according to feed manufacturer's recommendations using a horse's weight and body condition. Feed by weight and not by volume. A coffee can or scoop is fine but you should know the weight of a volume measurement.
- 16. Fast Eaters-** Horses that tend to bolt their feed, (large bites with minimal chewing) should be fed in large-bottom troughs. Smooth stones can be placed in the trough to slow them down even more.
- 17. Happy Horses-** Minimize stress. Keep horses in small groups; keep the groups the same. Horses are gregarious (they like each other's company). Once a pecking order is established, anxiety is created by moving them around. Anxiety can cause colic; this is what happens due to a change of housing. Some horses pair up. If they have to be separated, use sedation to minimize anxiety.

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