COLIC

ELITE EQUINE VETERINARIANS

WHAT IS "COLIC"?

Colic is a term widely used amongst the horse community to describe the symptoms we associate with **abdominal pain**, which in horses is often related to gastrointestinal problems. Horses are particularly sensitive to gastrointestinal pain, which can be caused by a variety of issues and range in severity from **mild to life-threatening**. Pain can be caused by intestinal **spasms** (such as inflammation or infection), **dilation** or stretching of the gut wall (from feed or gas accumulation), reduced blood supply (such as a **strangulation**, **torsion** or **intussusception**) or **entrapment** (where part of the intestine moves somewhere abnormal within the abdomen).

Early diagnosis and treatment is important in giving our horses the **best chance** of survival. If referral and surgery is an option then it is best done as early as possible before your horse is too compromised. Colic is usually diagnosed based on the owner's history and a clinical examination, although the exact cause may not be determined at the initial consultation. **Our primary aim** as veterinarians is to thoroughly assess your horse's symptoms and vital parameters, provide adequate pain relief and address the most likely cause of the colic.

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CLINICAL PRESENTATION

The clinical presentation of horses can vary with the **common** signs of colic including:

- Rolling
- Pawing the ground
- Sweating
- Kicking at their stomach

More **subtle** (mild) signs to be aware of include:

- Inappetence
- Lethargy
- Restlessness (shifting weight, adjusting, unable to stand still)
- Flank watching
- Lip curling
- Posturing to urinate
- Repeatedly lying down and getting up
- Lying down for extended periods of time
- Rapid breathing

Some horses may have skin abrasions to their face (particularly around their eyes) and body (shoulders and point of hips) from repeated rolling and thrashing around. It is important to know your horse's **"normal"** as it makes it much easier to recognise when things aren't normal so you can respond quickly and appropriately.

At certain times of year where the **seasons change** seem to correlate with increased colic episodes. The good news is most colic's are mild and respond well to early treatment on farm with pain relief and/or oral fluids.

Impaction colic can occur when horses' water consumption reduces combined with a diet high in dry matter, such as hay. This results in an accumulation of dry feed material within the gut, which moves more **slowly** through the intestines. This slower gut transit time results in the remaining small percentage of water within the feed material being absorbed by the intestine which further drys out the faeces. The gut wall is then stretched as the dry faeces accumulate causing pain and colic symptoms.

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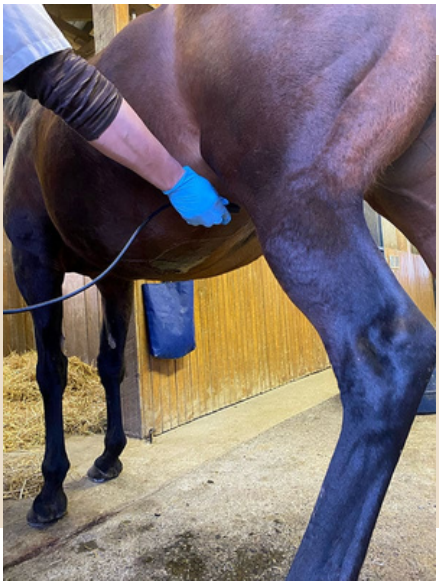
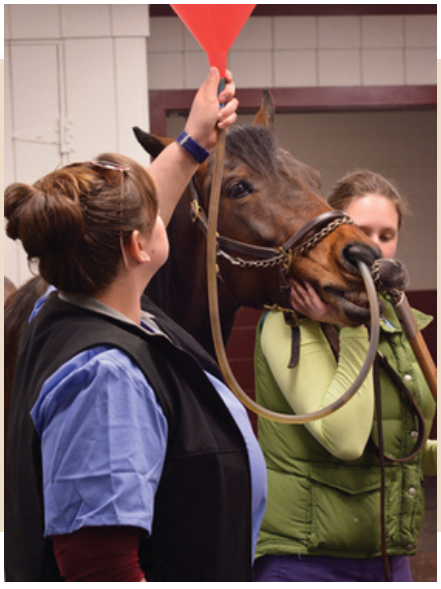
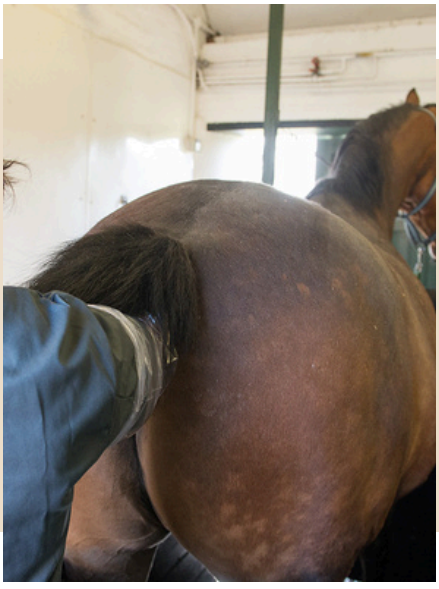
VETERINARY MEDICAL TREATMENT

Medical treatment for colic **on-farm** involves providing analgesia (pain relief) with anti-inflammatories and/or sedation and can also include rehydration with oral fluids and electrolytes. These drugs provide comfort first and allow us to perform further tests to aid in our diagnosis.

As veterinarians, we take a very **structured approach** to diagnosing and treating colic. We need to closely monitor the severity of pain and response to pain relief given as when a horse "**breaks through**" pain relief medication, this is one of the most important clinical signs in determining the need for referral. Another diagnostic test we perform routinely for colic is blood lactate levels which is linked to oxygen delivery to the intestines and when elevated is a very important indicator that the horse should be referred.







Other procedures that we can perform if indicated from their clinical assessment include:

- Passing a nasogastric tube,
- Oral electrolyte or intravenous fluids,
- Rectal examination,
- Blood work,
- Abdominocentesis (abdominal tap) and
- Ultrasound examination.

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THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOUR HORSE'S DIGESTION

- Offer electrolyte water **after riding** to encourage your horse to replace the fluid and electrolytes they have lost through sweat.
- Add a small amount of **electrolytes** into your daily feeds to keep water intake up and the faecal material within the bowel moist
- Encourage drinking with free choice electrolyte water and normal water in the paddock. (offering **LUKE WARM** water during winter months can help increase water intake)
- Offering water with a small amount of **molasses** may help you in leading your horse to water and making it drink.
- Feeding **two meals** daily rather than one big feed to accommodate the increased energy requirements of your horse during winter.
- Feeding good **quality** feed and hay products
- **Slowly** introducing new feed sources- try introduce newer hay cuts with older to reduce gastrointestinal disturbances.
- **Monitoring manure** output (normal number of manure piles produced in 24 hours is typically 8-12) versus feed input. If your horse is eating more, but producing fewer faeces this could suggest a slower transit of feed through the gut and an increased risk of impaction.
- Performing regular **Faecal Egg Count**s to rule out parasites as a likely cause.

When dealing with colic- knowing your horse's normal behaviour and calling your veterinarian early is important to give your horse the best chance of survival. Colic is considered a medical emergency with urgent veterinary attention recommended and often required.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact us on 0412 619 740.