

## INSURANCE

If a horse is insured for veterinary fees, it may not include colic surgery. It is always advisable to read the policy in depth and the small print before you purchase it. Always shop around for insurance and do not be frightened to ask insurers about exemptions in the policy or anything that you do not understand. If your horse requires colic surgery and you wish to go ahead with the procedure, given the risks, and your insurance does not cover this procedure, be sure that you have the substantial funds required to cover the costs of the procedure and the extensive aftercare.

## CURRENT RESEARCH

The Home of Rest for Horses, the oldest horse charity in the world, has launched The Echo Memorial Appeal, to raise funds to win the battle against equine colic. As the UK's leading provider of research into equine ailments, The Home has already devoted thousands of pounds to research the causes, management and treatment of colic. It now needs to take that step further forward and find the missing pieces to the jigsaw and make colic history.

Many people still remember the Metropolitan Police horse Echo who was so terribly injured in the Hyde Park bombing of 1982 that he was never able to return to full work again. Echo spent 20 years at The Home of Rest for Horses' stables in Buckinghamshire – and but for a terrible bout of colic which caused his death, might still be there today.

Please support The Echo Memorial Appeal with the knowledge that every penny raised in Echo's name will be dedicated to equine colic.

Please send your donations quoting reference EMA01:-

### By Post

The Echo Memorial Appeal, The Home of Rest for Horses, Westcroft Stables, Slad Lane, Lacey Green, Bucks HP27 OPP

### By Credit Card

Tel. 01494 488464

### Online

[www.homeofrestforhorses.co.uk](http://www.homeofrestforhorses.co.uk)



**The British Horse Society**  
Registered Charity No. 209934

*This leaflet was sponsored by*



**THE HOME  
OF REST  
FOR HORSES**

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Registered Charity no. 231748

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## ADVICE ON

# COLIC



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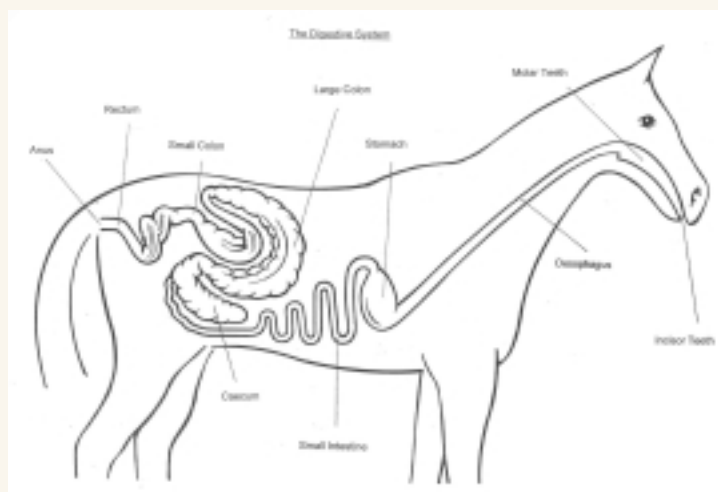
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## HOW THE HORSE'S DIGESTIVE TRACT WORKS

The horse has a very complex digestive system consisting of; the mouth, oesophagus, stomach, small intestine, large intestine, and rectum. The system is designed around the horse grazing for at least 12 hours a day on a diet of grass or similar vegetation.

Horses are unique in the fact that they are unable to vomit due to a muscular valve at the entrance of the stomach preventing food from being regurgitated. In the very rare circumstance when this valve is not functioning properly, food may be regurgitated.



## WHAT IS COLIC?

Colic is a symptom and not a disease; it is indicative that a horse is suffering with pain in its abdominal tract. The behaviour demonstrated by a horse suffering with colic will vary greatly depending on the type and severity of the colic. Colic is an all too common condition and a horse can suffer with colic at anytime; it can affect any horse, of any breed and age. Colic is potentially life threatening and should be treated as an emergency in all instances.

## TYPES OF COLIC

There are a number of types of colic, listed below are the most frequently seen colics in horses:

### Impaction

Impaction can occur at various sites within the digestive tract. This type of colic can be caused by indigestible, dry feed such as unsoaked sugar beet pellets that stick together or swell causing a blockage in the digestive tract. Meconium retention (the first faeces passed by a new born foal) is another cause of impaction colic.

Horses with impaction colic usually experience low grade pain for prolonged periods. This colic can last for several days and is potentially fatal if the horse is not treated promptly.

### Spasmodic

Spasmodic colic is the most common type of colic diagnosed in horses. It is often associated with stress and/or excitement. Bouts of short sharp pain caused by spasms of the intestinal walls may be experienced, with loud gut sounds. Recovery may be spontaneous, but prompt veterinary attention is still required.

### Flatulent

Flatulent colic is also known as tympanic or gas colic. This results from excessive gas accumulation in the large intestine. High pitch gut sounds are commonly associated with this type of colic. Flatulent colic is caused by food materials fermenting in the digestive tract, this is commonly seen in horses which are fed large quantities of fermentable food such as rich spring grass.

### Obstructive

There are various types of obstructive colic. Strangulation and mechanical pressure on the gut, are potentially the most serious types of colic. This is different to the blockage caused by a mass of food (impaction) or foreign material such as sand in the intestine. A strangulating obstruction disrupts the blood flow, usually when a piece of the intestine becomes twisted, commonly referred to as a 'twisted gut'.

## Non-strangulating infarction

This usually occurs if a blood vessel becomes blocked, usually affecting an artery that feeds sections of the intestine which then dies. Parasites are a common cause of this type of colic.

## Enteritis

Enteritis is inflammation of the small intestine. Diarrhoea or scouring are clinical signs commonly associated with this type of colic.

## SYMPTOMS

The symptoms will depend greatly on the severity and type of the colic; these may include some or all of the following:

- Changes in eating habits, including a loss of appetite
- Continuously getting down to roll and then getting back up again
- Pawing the ground
- Pacing the stable
- Limited or no passage of faeces
- Straining to excrete faeces
- Turning round and looking at their flanks
- Kicking at their abdomen
- Anxious and shivering
- Sweating
- Abnormal temperature, respiratory rate and heart rate
- Excessive urination



## TREATMENT

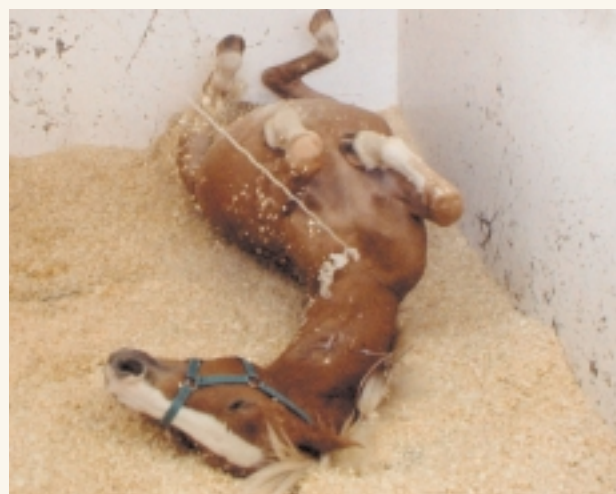
**All cases of colic must be treated as an emergency and veterinary advice sought immediately when colic is suspected.**

Walking a horse with colic to try and prevent it from rolling is traditionally recommended but what is most important is that you ensure that if the horse does go down and roll it can do so safely without getting cast or damaging itself on hard surfaces or projections.

Treatment will vary depending on the type and severity of the colic. The majority of cases can be successfully treated by drugs administered by a veterinary surgeon. Pain relief is often administered to help alleviate the horse's discomfort.

More serious cases such as strangulating colic (twisted gut) that do not respond to medication may be referred for colic surgery. Colic surgery is a complex procedure and may not be an option in every case. Surgery can be expensive and carries a high level of risk for the patient. Early treatment is essential.

If your horse has colic and your veterinary surgeon advises that surgery is required be sure to assess whether this is the right decision for you and your horse. Colic surgery can be a complex and lengthy operation with the success rate being less



than 100%. It is essential to remember that after-care will be as important as the operation itself, your horse would require extensive after-care for a period of several months, and you could expect him to be off work for a number of months. Even if your horse insurance covers colic surgery it is vital to assess whether such an invasive procedure with numerous risks, followed by a restrictive after-care programme is in the best interests of your particular horse. If colic surgery is recommended discuss any concerns you may have with your vet.

## PREVENTION

Prevention is always better than cure, and following best management practice will help reduce the risk of colic. On occasions however, even with the best intentions it is impossible to eradicate the risk of colic completely.

### Feeding

It is essential that a well balanced diet is tailored to the needs of the individual horse. This should contain plenty of fibre, which is essential for gut mobility. Any changes to the diet should be done gradually; this includes changing feed stuffs, pasture and obtaining forage from a new supplier.

Good quality feed stuffs should always be used. Choosing a cheaper, lower quality feed or forage may compromise the horse's health and precipitate the onset of colic or respiratory disorders.

Feeds should always be stored in vermin and horse proof containers to prevent any escapee horses gorging themselves on the content of open feed bins.

Some horses choose to eat their bedding materials, some of which are not digestible and can result in impaction colic.

*For further information about feeding refer to the BHS leaflet Advice on Basic Feeding.*

### Parasite Control

Every horse owner should have an effective worming programme. Horses need periodic worming to reduce the risk of high parasite burdens which can cause significant damage to the digestive tract including disruption to the blood supply to the intestine, ulcerations and perforations making a horse more susceptible to colic.

Faecal egg counts can be carried out by a veterinary surgeon or veterinary laboratory to determine the worm burden of individual horses which will determine the frequency and type of worming required.

*For further information about parasites refer to the BHS leaflet Advice on Worm Control.*

### Exercise

Exercise requirements vary but any change in intensity or duration must be gradual. Sudden changes to exercise regimes may result in the onset of colic and other problems. Horses should always be appropriately warmed up and cooled down prior to and after exercise.

Feeding and watering horses in large quantities prior to exercise is not recommended. Similarly, feeding too soon after exercise, before the horse has completely cooled down, also poses the risk of inducing colic.

Water may be offered in small quantities to a horse after exercise but giving very cold water to a hot horse is best avoided. Once the horse has cooled down normal watering may be resumed.

### General Health Care

Horses' teeth need to be checked regularly, ideally every six months to a year. More attention should be given to young horses whose teeth are growing and constantly changing, and older horses whose teeth may become loose, decayed or have fallen out.

*For further information about health checks refer to the BHS leaflet Advice on Essential Health Care Requirements.*

### Routine

Horses like routine. Sudden changes to diet, exercise, turnout or owner visiting times may cause stress and induce colic. Regular checks should be carried out on horses throughout the day and last thing at night to ensure that they are well and have plenty of fresh clean water. If colic symptoms are suspected it is vital to contact your veterinary surgeon immediately and inform them of your concern.

**Recognising the symptoms of colic, treating it as an emergency and getting prompt veterinary assistance can potentially save your horse's life.**

Good hygiene and daily washing of feed bowls and water containers is vital. Stables should be mucked out daily and fresh bedding added on a regular basis.

