

I have just acquired my first horse. What is colic and what are the signs that would tell me my horse has this problem?

Congratulations on the acquisition of your first horse. With proper care and health maintenance you will surely foster an exciting, long-lasting relationship!

The problem of colic in horses is a significant cause of sickness and accounts for more deaths in adult horses than any other disease. Therefore, it is important to understand how to recognize it and know what to do if your horse is affected.

The term “colic” is a general term meaning abdominal pain. This discomfort can range from mild episodes requiring no treatment to extreme cases requiring corrective abdominal surgery.

The causes of colic are many and a few examples would include: build up of gas in the intestine, inflammation of the bowel, or blockages secondary to intestinal displacements, “twists” or severe impactions of the intestines. The latter two frequently require surgery for correction.

The signs of colic include: repeated pawing, rolling, sweating, labored breathing, looking back at the abdomen and restlessness. However, other abnormal behaviors may also be present.

It is difficult to determine the severity of your horse’s problem when it first begins, so it is important to watch your horse closely and notify your veterinarian as soon as signs are recognized.

In addition to calling your veterinarian at the first sign of a problem, you should also remove all hay and water access from the horse and keep the horse calm and quiet if possible. It is okay to allow the horse to lay down or even roll as long as you or the animal are in an area where injury is not likely (open pasture or large stall). Lastly, don’t administer any drugs to your horse without first consulting your veterinarian.

Things which you can do to help prevent colic are: routine health care including parasite control and dentistry, establish a daily routine with feeding and exercise schedules, provide constant access to fresh clean water, feed only limited amounts of grain as a supplement and insure that your horse's diet consists of mostly good quality hay or pasture for grazing (an adult horse weighing 1000 pounds needs about 10 pounds of good hay per day). Feed your horse off of the ground to avoid sand ingestion and always check alfalfa for blister beetles (see this link: <http://osuextra.okstate.edu/pdfs/F-2072web.pdf>).

Advances in equine medicine and surgery continue to improve and horses that were not successfully treated years ago are now recovering to live comfortable lives today. Remember that early intervention is critical to the quick resolution and favorable outcomes when dealing with colic in horses.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

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