

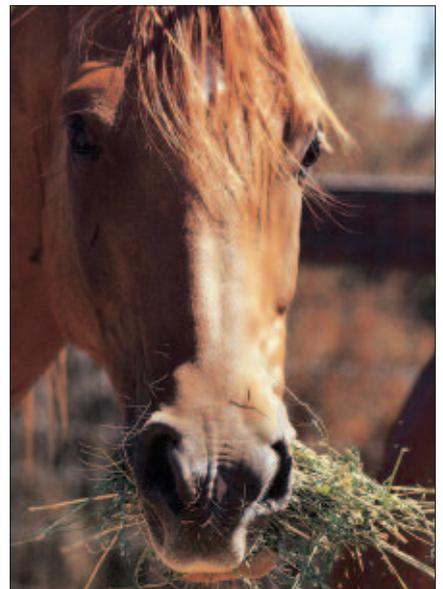
COLIC PRECAUTIONS

Colic is an ever-present concern for horsekeepers. Even when an episode is mild—and most are—it's worrisome to watch a horse pace, paw and roll. Serious cases can mean expensive surgery or even euthanasia. Fortunately, researchers have been able to identify several factors that contribute to all types of colic—from minor upsets to major intestinal disturbances. Based on their findings, here are six steps to take to minimize your horse's risk of digestive upset.

Step 1: Feed mostly hay and offer grain only in small meals.

Horses are continual foraging machines. When left on pasture and to their own devices, they pick and choose a mouthful here and a mouthful there for up to 20 hours a day. Their digestive system functions best when it is continually processing fiber. Grain in small amounts is processed readily. But a large carbohydrate-heavy meal can overwhelm the small intestine, causing it to spill excess undigested carbohydrates into the cecum and colon. The bacteria that normally ferment fiber there begin to feed on the starch molecules. But the resulting surge of fermentation produces high levels of acid and alcohol

Six steps to help keep your horse's digestive system healthy.



TERRY GLEASON

COLIC-FIGHTING TIP

Feed hay before grain

If you can't give a horse free access to hay at all times, give him an hour or so to "graze" the hay he does get before you deliver the concentrated portion of his meals. At least one scientific study suggests that horses who receive a hay ration prior to getting grain are at a lower risk of colic than horses who are offered grain first.

ROB FRIEDMAN/ISTOCKPHOTO

Colic signs



SEEKING RELIEF: Colic pain will often cause a horse to pace, paw and repeatedly lie down and get up.

JANIS TREMPER

Generally speaking, a horse with colic will pace, paw and repeatedly lie down and get up. In many cases, he'll exhibit additional signs. Here are those associated with three common colics, from minor to quite serious.

Suspect *gas colic*—which causes sharp, brief, intermittent pain—if your horse

- swings his head from one side to the other, indicating that the pain is moving from side to side
- stomps his feet
- looks “annoyed”
- pins his ears back
- rolls his eyes
- is unusually distracted
- is producing gassy rumblings from his belly.

Suspect an *impaction colic*—which causes subtle, gradually appearing

signs—if your horse

- seems “dazed”—markedly less attentive to normal stimuli
- looks very slowly at his side where the pain is
- lies down at a time when he is usually on his feet.

Suspect a *twisted gut*—which is accompanied by worsening pain—if your horse

- appears uncomfortable and becomes progressively restless over an hour or so
- is sweating
- fails to respond to simple pain-relieving medication such as Banamine (flunixin meglumine).

If your horse shows signs suggesting that he is suffering from any type of colic, alert your veterinarian immediately so that he can evaluate the situation.

that ultimately kill the bacteria, triggering the release of dangerous toxins. The result can be colic and, in some cases, laminitis.

To make the most of his digestive design, offer your horse free-choice fibrous hay at all times and give him the least amount of starchy concentrated feed that he requires to maintain healthy moderate body condition. Stick to clean, somewhat green, fine-stemmed hay. If you must feed concentrates to maintain his weight or to fuel performance, choose a product that is low in starch and break the ration into four or more smaller meals that you dole out over the course of the day and evening. Mixing grain with some fine hay may also modulate the amount of starch entering the gut at any one time.

COLIC-FIGHTING TIP

Feed only fresh grain

Grain that remains at the bottom of a bin for several weeks is more likely to mold and become a source of digestive upset. Keep it fresh by storing only two weeks' worth. When you're beginning to scrape the bottom of the bin, empty the remnants into a bucket, refill with fresh feed and pour the older grain on top so it's fed first.



CELIA STRAIN

PREVENTION

COLIC



COLIC-FIGHTING TIP

Encourage him to drink

Dehydration can contribute to the development of colic. Make sure your horse has access to fresh, clean water at all times. If you're on the road, offer him water every few hours. If he's finicky about drinking from strange tubs or water sources, bring along a container of water from home as well as his own water bucket.

BOB LANGRISH

Step 2: Make only those dietary changes that are necessary and implement them gradually.

Any dramatic change in diet has the potential to overwhelm the bacterial balance in a horse's gut. To be on the safe side, convert to a different ration gradually over seven to 10 days. Avoid changing both hay and grain types at the same time if you can. Reductions in ration size or nutrient level can be made relatively rapidly, in a week or less. But when you're moving to a higher-powered diet involving more carbohydrates, fat and/or protein, take at least 10 days of incremental substitution of the old with the new to give the horse's intestinal bacteria time to acclimate.

Step 3: Maximize turnout.

Research indicates that horses who spend the greatest part of the day standing in stalls are much more prone to abdominal disease than those who get extended regular turnout. The simple continual act of stepping to reach one bite, then the next and the next, keeps the food sloshing along in the gut and is believed to increase intestinal motility and digestion.

If it's impossible for your horse to be turned out all the time, see that he gets at least some turnout daily in an area large enough for him to play freely. You can also compensate for inadequate turnout by supplying daily exercise. A light to moderate workout in a round pen, on the longe line or under saddle is better than no activity at all.

Step 4: Keep him from eating sand with his ration.

Horses may ingest sand along with grain or hay that is fed directly from the ground. They may also consume



TROUBLE FREE: Research shows that turning a horse out for extended periods can lower his risk of digestive upset.

PREVENTION COLIC



PROTECTION: Adopt a targeted deworming program to control internal parasites that may precipitate colic.

BOB LANGRISH

soil minerals while closely grazing pastures that grow on sandy soil.

Because it is heavier than other substances your horse might ingest, sand settles in the pockets and folds of his large intestine and stays there. Its abrasive quality—think sandpaper—irritates the gut lining. Large amounts can cause impaction or blockage.

To reduce sand intake:

- Don't feed horses from bare ground that contains sand.
- Offer grain in a bucket or tub that can't easily be tipped.
- Feed hay from a rack or net that's positioned above a catch-pan or pad of wood, metal, concrete or rubber matting.
- Limit or reduce the number of horses sharing a field or paddock to prevent overgrazing.
- Feed supplemental hay when pastures develop bare spots due to overgrazing, drought or other weather extremes.

COLIC-FIGHTING TIP

Facilitate communication

Do you board your horse and worry that you'll miss signs of impending colic? Attach a small dry erase board and pen beside his stall, and encourage barn staff and fellow boarders to jot down any restlessness or sluggish behavior that might suggest internal discomfort.



MOUTHFUL: Have your horse's teeth checked regularly for sharp edges and other abnormalities that can prevent him from chewing his food adequately, which, in turn, can lead to colic.

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Step 5: Customize your herd's deworming program.

Parasites can damage digestive organs and/or lead to intestinal blockages, both of which can result in colic. Deworming programs are most effective when tailored to horses' living arrangements and the specific parasite threats they face.

Fecal egg counts are a useful means for determining whether your deworming program is working. Talk to your veterinarian about using fecal egg counts to develop a customized parasite control plan for your herd.

Step 6: Arrange for regular dental checkups.

Feed that is chewed thoroughly is more easily digested and less likely to lead to impaction colic. Teeth that have sharp edges, are infected or show other abnormalities can make chewing painful or even impossible.

An annual dental examination is a good idea for every horse, and twice-yearly checkups may be called for in older horses with very worn teeth. If your horse hasn't had a dental evaluation recently, contact your veterinarian to schedule one.

As long as people care for horses, colic is likely to be an ever-present concern. But your horse's risk can be greatly reduced through everyday management practices geared to support his digestive health. ■