

# ESSEX HORSE & PONY PROTECTION SOCIETY

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## COLIC

Definition of colic: "Abdominal pain or discomfort".

### Common causes of colic

- Sudden change in diet.
- Inappropriate diet.
- Grass cuttings – can lead to impaction and/or gas colic.
- Unsoaked sugar beet.
- Eating bedding.
- Mouldy feed (eg haylage which has been open too long).
- Poor dentition.
- Lack of water.
- Stress.
- Box rest/lack of exercise.
- Internal growth, eg lipoma.
- Impaired digestion due to worm damage.
- Sudden emergence of worms into the intestine.
- Tumours.
- Equine grass sickness.
- Liver damage.
- Infarction – blockage of a blood vessel to the gut.
- Rupture or tear within the digestive tract.
- Sedation. Watch your horse carefully when recovering and allow him to nibble a little grass once he is steady on his feet. Do not feed dry hay as the digestive system will not be able to cope and it could lead to impaction.

### Minimising the risk of colic

- Clean water must be available at all times.
- Diet should be based on forage (grass, hay, haylage).
- Cereals should be fed only if necessary and in small quantities – little and often.
- Introduce new feeds gradually.
- Do not allow grazing on sandy surfaces where the grazing is sparse.
- Regular dental checks.
- Worm control programme.
- Make any changes gradually, eg if horse has been stabled all winter, do not just turn out and leave on lush grass, or in the autumn do not change suddenly from being turned out on grass to being stabled 24/7 with dry hay!
- Avoid stress - make sure your horse has a regular routine and suitable companions.

### Signs of colic

Call the vet immediately if your horse shows any of the following signs:

- Restless – box walking, repeated lying down/rolling.
- No appetite.

- No droppings or change in consistency of droppings.
- Flank watching, pawing, kicking belly.
- Dull and depressed, head hanging low.
- Sweating.
- Increased heart rate.
- Increased breathing rate.
- Gums become darker in colour.

### **Normal Parameters**

Heart rate: 28-44 beats per minute.

Breathing: 8-16 breaths per minute

Temperature: 37.5 – 38.5 Centigrade (99.5 – 101.3 Fahrenheit)

The above vary according to the type of horse/pony and its level of fitness, so check what is normal for your horse/pony before a crisis occurs.

### **Types of colic**

- Spasmodic – one of the most common. Sharp intermittent pain. Loud gut sounds may be heard.
- Tympanic – “gas colic”. High-pitched gut sounds may be heard.
- Impaction – large dry lump of food becomes stuck. Usually in large intestine. Low grade pain over a prolonged period. Most are treatable with prompt attention.
- Sand colic – due to ingesting sand or soil, usually when grass is sparse.
- Displacements – something in the gut moves abnormally, causing an obstruction.
- Strangulation/torsion – a twisting or obstruction cuts off the blood flow to the intestine. Causes severe pain and sweating and will probably require urgent surgery.

### **Waiting for the vet**

- Wear a hat and gloves when handling the horse. A horse in pain will not be aware of you.
- Make sure the horse cannot injure itself. If in stable, remove buckets, etc.
- Move to a safe environment if possible, eg manège, and keep on a lunge line.
- Allow to roll if in a safe environment – it used to be thought that this could cause a twisted gut or make the colic worse, but this is not now thought to be the case.
- Gentle walking for 15-20 minutes may help but do not exhaust your horse. If surgery/travelling are required, he will need all his strength.

Most types of colic can be treated easily if the vet attends in the early stages. Time is of the essence, so **do not delay in calling the vet.**

Be prepared for colic and have a plan in mind. The cost of colic surgery is usually £5,000+, so check your insurance policy before a crisis arises.