



No other word strikes fear in the hearts and minds of horse owners more than the word “Colic” - it can affect any horse at any time for a multitude of reasons. Sadly, colic is one of the biggest causes of death in horses world wide but fortunately the vast majority of colic episodes will respond to on-farm medical treatment.

## So what is Colic?

Colic is a broad veterinary term used to describe any form of abdominal pain in the horse. There are many different causes - most of these are gastrointestinal in nature but occasionally colic can be the result of things such as urinary and reproductive problems, and even some severe respiratory diseases can show themselves as colic.

## The signs of Colic

Knowing and recognising the signs of colic is very important for all horse owners as it will allow you to notice even the most subtle changes in your horse’s behaviour and allow us to attend to your horse as soon as possible. It must be remembered that no two colic episodes are alike and there is a vast variation in type, nature and severity of colic signs. Signs you may see include:

- Pawing at the ground
- Kicking or biting at the belly
- Rolling
- Inappetence
- Repeated lifting up lip
- Stretching out as if to urinate
- Lying on back
- Flank watching
- Repeated lying down
- Holding head in unusual position
- Sweating
- Dog sitting
- Depression





## Types of Colic

As mentioned previously, there is a myriad of different reasons for colic and often we are never really quite sure why a horse has shown colic signs. The vast majority of these are due to some sort of gastrointestinal problem. The following is a broad classification of some of the more common types of colics.

### Idiopathic / Spasmodic

This is certainly the most common type of colic and equates to the vast majority of colics we treat in our practice. Spasmodic colic occurs when the bowel is contracting in an abnormal manner creating painful spasms or is generally “over-active”. Spasmodic colics usually respond very well to anti-spasmodic drugs along with other symptomatic treatment. ‘Idiopathic’ is a medical term for ‘of unknown origin’. Despite the best veterinary investigation there are still plenty of colics that we never quite find a cause for. The good thing however is that the very vast majority of these respond to simple on-farm medical treatment.

### Impactions

This term describes when the bowel, usually the large intestine is blocked by a firm mass of food. This is a fairly common type of colic and ranges in severity from a small simple or partial obstruction that resolves easily on farm with appropriate therapy to larger and more severe impactions that may require surgery to correct.

### Displacements and Torsions

Displacements occur when one section of the bowel moves to an abnormal location within the abdomen and Torsions describe colics where the bowel twists on itself. The horses gastrointestinal system is unusual due to the fact that large sections of the bowel are either suspended in place by loose lengths of tissue (e.g. small intestine) or completely unattached as is the case for the large intestine. Both of these predispose the horse to displacements and torsions. Displacements and torsions are intestinal accidents that are not common, but are very serious in nature and almost always require surgery to correct the problem. The early stages of a torsion or a displacement can often present in very similar manner to the less life-threatening forms of colic - another reason to take all colic episodes seriously and call the vet at the earliest signs of abdominal pain.



## What to do if your horse has colic

- **Call your vet immediately** - colic is a true veterinary emergency and time is of the essence
- Place your horse in a small yard or a well bedded stable to allow for easy and close observation.
- Remove any food from the stable until the vet arrives
- If your horse is rolling violently, gently walk them or keep them standing to try and distract them from the pain. Violently rolling horses often hurt themselves so trying to prevent self trauma is helpful - but without putting yourself into danger of a painful horse throwing itself to the ground.

## What to tell the vet

Your vet on arrival will probably ask you some of the following questions. If you know the answers to some of the questions you can help them look after your horse in the best way possible .

- Any previous episodes of colic? And how did they resolve?
- How old is your horse?
- How long has your horse been colicky for?
- What colic signs has your horse been showing?
- Has your horse passed any faeces?
- When did your horse last eat or drink?
- Any changes in management lately?
- Any changes in diet?
- Is your mare pregnant?
- If your mare has recently foaled, how long ago did she foal?

### **Colic Myth: Stopping your horse from rolling will stop the bowel from twisting**

This is highly unlikely - happy healthy horses roll normally in the field and their bowel doesn't twist. Walking your horse can however help distract them from the pain and more importantly prevent them from self-traumatising. You must remember however not to walk your horse to exhaustion and to stop for a few minutes every so often to monitor for colic behaviour in your horse.



## Treatment

After assessing all the different factors involved in your horse's colic your vet will decide on the appropriate course of treatment. This may include administration of fluids/electrolytes down a naso-gastric tube plus or minus some form of a laxative if an impaction is suspected. Pain relief is one of the cornerstones of colic therapy and your vet will decide what drug and how much is appropriate. The key to any colic being seen on-farm is that we want to see a good response to pain medication. If signs recur it is vital that you contact your vet as soon as possible as the horse may need to be referred to a hospital for further investigation and possible surgery.

## Colic Surgery

One of the main things that a vet needs to determine is whether the horse can be managed medically or requires surgery. There are many different indications for surgery and your vet will assess this during the investigation. It must be remembered that the vast majority of colics do not require surgery and respond well to on-farm treatment - but if your vet does feel that your horse needs surgery, or at least requires further investigation at a referral hospital, time is of the essence. The decision to take your horse to surgery can be very difficult and unfortunately due to the nature of colic a rapid decision is often required. Many factors are involved in making this decision such as severity of the problem, likelihood of a success, expense and many more, but your vet is trained to help you make the right decision for the horse.



## Is Colic my fault?

A very common question owners will ask but the answer is almost in every occasion, no! You must remember that horses are predisposed to colic because of their unusual gastrointestinal anatomy and the particular way their gut works. Even the best kept and most well managed horse will get colic.