Colic Prevention: Good Horse Digestive Health

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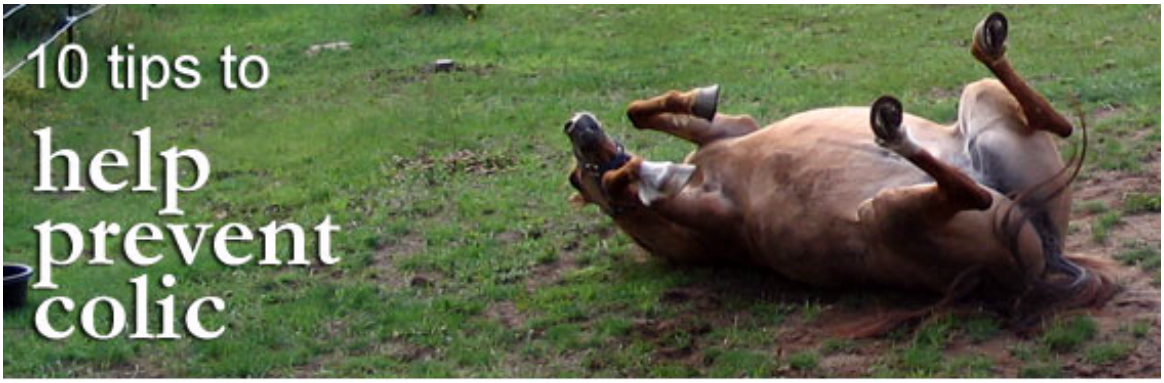

It causes normally placid horses to pace and paw at the ground. The pain it brings drives horses to continually lie down and rise, swing their heads from side to side, or grow restless. It is also the number one killer of horses across the country and around the world.

What is this common, extremely painful, and potentially fatal abdominal condition? It is known as colic and chances are your horse is more susceptible to it than you may realize. However, there are simple ways to help promote good digestive health and help prevent colic in your horse.

colic types

Contrary to popular belief, colic is not a disease. Instead, it is a combination of symptoms that result from abdominal pain, intestinal displacement, or gastrointestinal obstruction. Basically, there are three types of colic:

- **Gas Colic** - the most common form of colic, occurs when gas collects in your horse's bowels and causes pain, and sometimes a distended bowel, as it passes. Horses with gas colic will often swing their heads from side to side, stomp their feet, pin back their ears, roll their eyes, and exhibit gassy stomach rumblings.
- **Obstructive Colic** - this form of colic is often divided into two categories: impaction colic occurs when food masses, parasites, or other foreign bodies accumulate in the bowels and prohibit passage through the intestines; sand colic occurs when pasture sand or soil is ingested and accumulates in your horse's gut. Both cause lethargy, restlessness, pawing, excessive sweating, and an absence of normal abdominal sounds.
- **Twisted Gut** - this form of colic is caused by a physical twisting of your horse's intestine. It causes extreme pain, excessive sweating, discomfort, progressive restlessness, and is non-responsive to simple pain relief medication.

Each type of colic is serious and potentially life-threatening, oftentimes within a matter of minutes. If your horse exhibits any signs of abdominal pain, contact your veterinarian immediately so he or she can assess the situation.

colic causes

Horses have sensitive digestive systems. Therefore, any number of factors can cause colic in your horse, pony, or other equine. Although all horses are susceptible to colic, regardless of age, sex, or breed, some horses seem to be predisposed to colic due to digestive system anatomy or function. Regardless, the most common causes of colic include

- **Bloodworms** (strongyles) that damage blood vessels near the bowel
- **Roundworms** (ascarids) that accumulate and block intestines
- **Sudden diet change** that upsets stomach and digestive function
- **Lack of drinking water** that causes food to bind together, causing an impaction

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- **Horses that gulp food** without chewing, which often results in impaction
- **Ingestion of sand or dirt**, which accumulates in the intestines

colic prevention

Effective colic prevention relies on good digestive health. Use the following ten steps to maintain proper function of your horse's digestive system and help prevent colic. However, any immediate change to your horses diet, exercise, or daily routine can also cause colic and, therefore, needs to be gradual.

1. Feed a high quality, roughage-rich diet. Grass is best, followed by hay. Grass or hay should always be available. Feed smaller amounts of grain unless work demands or your veterinarian suggests more.
2. Mimic natural grazing schedules by feeding two or three smaller portions of grain throughout the day, as opposed to one single feeding that overloads the digestive tract.
3. Offer fresh, clean water at all times. Use Stock Tank Cleaners to keep troughs clean and free from insects. Hang a water bucket in your horse stall and fill it daily to encourage your horse to drink.
4. Regularly deworm your horse with a suitable Ivermectin-based wormer. In addition, pyrantel-based continuous wormers may also help control internal parasites.
5. Offer frequent, if not continual, pasture turnout. Daily exercise is very important. If necessary, build an electric horse fence to help contain your horse while he exercises and plays in the pasture.
6. Use feed pans to lift feed away from sand and other contaminants but still mimic natural, heads-down grazing postures. Elevated wall feeders lift equine food even farther off the ground.
7. Use manure forks and suitable buckets to muck stalls frequently. Also harrow pastures to break up manure and help break the parasite life cycle.
8. Remove noxious weeds and other indigestible substances from hay, bedding, and pasture grass. Suitable perimeter sprays and traps can kill insects before they invade your horse's hay or stall bedding.
9. Arrange for regular dental checkups. Properly aligned teeth are better at chewing food, which leads to improved digestion and less chance of impaction.
10. Use digestive supplements to promote beneficial bacteria growth, bulk up fiber intake, and improve digestive health. Some, such as Sand Clear, are even formulated to help flush sand out of your horse's digestive tract. Calming supplements can also help reduce anxiety that can lead to digestive stress during travel.

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