

# Feeding the Colic Prone Horse

Avoid Abrupt Dietary and Environmental Changes

Many horses will transition from fresh forage (pasture) to a dry forage (hay) diet during the next few months. This increase in dry matter combined with a decreased water intake, may trigger colic episode. Any horse can suffer from colic, although some appear more prone to the condition. The following have been identified as risk factors:

- Recent or sudden dietary change
- Poor feeding practices
- High starch, low forage diets
- Inadequate water intake or failure to drink
- Poor teeth or lack of dental care
- Stress, including traveling, competing or changing routines. Remember, stress is not always exhibited outwardly.
- Vices such as wind sucking or cribbing
- High parasite load or previous parasite damage

## What is colic?

In the simplest sense, colic is abdominal pain that can range from very mild to life threatening. Generally, colic can be classified as one of the following types:

- Impaction: A blockage in the intestine
- Spasmodic: Increased intestinal contractions
- Tympanitic (gaseous): A build-up of gas in the intestine
- Sand colic: Inflammation or blockage of the intestine resulting from ingesting sand

Regardless of severity, you should always call your veterinarian at the first sign of colic as early diagnosis and treatment is key to recovery.

### **Signs of colic**

The most widely recognized symptom of colic is the horse looking at or kicking at its abdomen. Other symptoms include the following:

- Pawing at the ground
- Rolling
- Stall walking or pacing
- Sweating
- Changes in frequency and/or consistency of feces
- Increased temperature, pulse and respiration rates
- Loss of appetite or refusal to eat or drink

### **Feeding colic prone horses**

Second to water, fiber is the most important nutrient in the horse's diet. A high forage diet plays a vital role in maximizing digestion and preventing episodes of colic. Forage includes grass, hay (grass & legume types) and forage replacers (cubed or chopped) and should be fed ad libitum (free access) whenever possible.

Make sure you do not restrict forage rations to less than 1.5 percent of the horse's bodyweight for mature horses—although some growing horses may not be physically able to consume that large amount.

During grass growing periods, it may be necessary to manage horses prone to colic as though they are laminitic by limiting grazing or using a grazing muzzle. You should also watch fructan levels, grazing horses overnight or early to mid morning.

Always make dietary changes gradually, especially for horses that are prone to colic. As a guide, change feed over seven to ten days, exchanging one pound of existing feed for new feed every other day. You may need to extend this period of adjustment for especially sensitive horses.

This gradual change over for feeding forage is often overlooked. Forage accounts for the largest portion of the horse's diet and rapid changes (amount or type) can cause significant disturbances to hind gut bacteria.

## Energy Sources

Simply put, calories equal energy and may be provided by fiber, fat, starch and sugar. Traditional compound feeds are high in cereal grains and contain starch that can lead to or exacerbate incidences of colic. Protein, on the other hand, is not a primary source of energy for horses and does not cause colic.

Follow these guidelines to help prevent colic:

- Select feeds high in digestible fiber and necessary fat
- Feed the amount of calories appropriate for the horse's condition. An overweight horse needs a low calorie diet!
- Look for feeds with lower starch levels (maximum 20%), remembering the amount of starch that can be tolerated depends on the individual horse.
- Provide a lower sugar diet.

Fat is a safe and efficient calorie source. High quality vegetable, soybean or corn oil may be added at a rate of up to 100 ml per 200 pounds of bodyweight. However, if you choose to add pure oil to your horse's diet rather than a commercially prepared fat supplement, you will need to add 100 IU of Vitamin E for every 100 ml of oil you feed to replace the Vitamin E lost during the oil manufacturing process.

## Preventing sand colic

The ingestion of some sand is inevitable for horses living in areas with sandy soil. Limiting exposure by not overgrazing pastures and feeding from buckets can help reduce sand intake.

## Colic surgery

For horses that must undergo colic surgery, post-operative diet and management will depend on the type of surgery performed. Provided the intestines remain intact, a high fiber, low starch diet is generally the best option. When sections of the large intestine have been removed, it is sometimes beneficial to feed a slightly elevated level of starch. Colic surgery is a delicate procedure and careful post-operative management is critical. Always seek advice from a nutritionist before implementing any new diet.



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