

GETTING TO THE ‘GUTS’ OF THE MATTER

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I witnessed my first ever case of colic at a livery yard in Spain. What struck me most was the obvious discomfort suffered by the horse: it was sweating, biting at its flank and straining as if trying to empty its bladder. What also struck me is that this was completely different to the symptoms displayed by one of our own horses some years later: this time, because we knew the horse and what was normal for him, we could just tell from his behaviour that something wasn't quite right long before more concrete signs of colic started to emerge.

The point is that colic can differ in its causes and severity, so knowing what is normal for your horse and familiarising yourself with some of the most common symptoms can help you identify the problem as early as possible, giving your horse the best chance of recovery.

Despite advances in diagnosis and treatment, colic is still one of the leading causes of emergency veterinary treatment for horses and sadly, it is still one of the main causes of equine deaths. And, when you consider the complexity and sensitivity of the equine gut and the fact that horses are unable to vomit, it's not surprising that problems with the gastrointestinal tract account for a large proportion of veterinary call-outs and insurance claims.

As with most things, there are things you can do to try and reduce the risk of your horse developing colic; however, even the best-managed horses can develop colic so being able to spot the symptoms and knowing when to call the vet are equally important.

One of the most valuable things you can do as a horse owner is ensure you know how to recognise the early signs of illness in your horse. This could be as simple as noticing small changes to appetite or behaviour or familiarising yourself with the normal temperature, resting heart rate and resting respiration rate for your horse.

A [recent survey](#) by the School of Veterinary Medicine and Science at the University of Nottingham revealed that 30.4% of horse owners were unsure of the normal resting heart rate of a horse with only a quarter of owners able to give appropriate values for normal respiratory rates and only 31% able to identify normal temperature range.

When it comes to colic, knowing how to read your horse's vital signs is, well, vital! An elevated heart rate or breathing rate is usually a good indicator of pain and can often be an indicator of the severity of the colic.

Resting heart rate

A normal resting heart rate in an adult horse is between 28 and 44 beats per minute. Most adult horses have a heart rate around 36 beats per minute. It is easier to time how many beats you feel in 15 seconds, and then multiply that by 4, to work out the rate per minute.

Resting respiratory rate

The normal resting respiratory rate in an adult horse is 12-16 breaths per minute. There is mild movement of the nostrils, and minimal effort taken during inspiration and expiration. It is easiest to watch the chest and the abdomen rise and fall standing to the side and back of the horse looking forward. Respiratory rate may be a little higher in ponies (up to 20-24 breaths per minute) The respiratory rate in foals is again different and values depend on their age.

Temperature

This should lie between 36.5 and 38.5 degrees centigrade in a normal adult horse. Horse's individual temperatures are very stable, and have minimal variation (dependent on the season). It may be wise to take your horse's temperature using a digital or mercury thermometer a few times to know what is standard for him/her. Temperature can be taken by placing a thermometer just through the anus. Place a small amount of lubricating gel (such a K-Y jelly) on it first to help ease it into the correct position. Temperature can be raised with fear, pain, excitement and infection. Low temperatures may indicate a circulatory problem or extreme cold.

Although colic can occur at any time of the year, as we move towards winter many horses have to adapt to changes in temperature and routine so here are some seasonal tips to help you manage those risks:

Ensure a constant supply of

Horses tend to drink less as the temperature drops and frozen water buckets don't help! Add to this the fact that they are usually eating less grass (which is $\frac{3}{4}$ water) and

fresh water more hay or concentrated feed and you can see why the risk of impaction colic increases. To prevent dehydration make sure your horse has access to a constant supply of fresh water and consider soaking feed or hay to provide added moisture.

Keep them moving Winter can be a period of immobility for horses and humans alike. For the horse, regular exercise is important for ensuring the movement of material along the digestive tract so try to make sure that your horse has regular turnout or an exercise routine to help keep their digestive system moving.

Check those teeth Believe it or not but impaction colic can be caused by a horse's inability to chew its food properly! This is more common in older horses and the risk increases in winter when reduced water intake and inadequate chewing of hay (which has a lower water content than grass) can lead to potentially fatal blockages in the gut. Having an annual dental check is the best safeguard against this problem and is usually a requirement of your insurance policy!

Colic is a potentially life-threatening condition for horses and can quickly develop from mild symptoms into something more serious. If you suspect your horse may be suffering from colic, call your vet immediately and they will be able to advise you. Below are some of the common symptoms of colic:

- Pawing at the ground and general restlessness
- Stretching and frequent attempts to urinate
- Turning the head to watch the stomach and/or hind quarters and/or biting the stomach
- Pacing up and down or box walking
- Repeatedly lying down and getting up again
- Rolling
- Groaning
- Grinding teeth
- Excess salivation
- Loss of appetite
- Not passing stools