

Ask A Vet: Careful With Colic

Sunday, November 23, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I've always been told to be careful of colic with my horses. I've made sure I know the signs so I will recognize it as soon as possible, but I don't actually know what causes this problem. What can I do to prevent colic?

Dear Reader,

It's important to know what to look for and to call your vet immediately if you suspect colic. And while there are things you can do to decrease your horse's risk, unfortunately colic can still happen. Colic simply means abdominal pain and is a common symptom for many different problems. Most commonly, colic is associated with some sort of intestinal problem. Horses have a stomach, over 70 feet of small intestine, and a large cecum and colon as well. All of this bowel is stuffed into their abdomen with other organs too.

Due to the angle at which the esophagus enters the stomach, horses cannot vomit despite the fact that ingesta can backup into and painfully distend the stomach. In addition, that 70 feet of small intestine is very motile and may become entrapped in spaces between other organs, or rotate around itself and strangulate, or cut off blood supply to itself. The cecum is a very large pouch, meaning ingesta enters and exits the same way and sometimes this creates a traffic jam there. The colon is shaped in such a way that ingesta there must pass through several different complete 180 degree or U-turns which can also create issues. As you can tell, feed has quite the ride from one end to the other, and the diameter varies dramatically along this winding road as well!

While this is an overly simplified summary of the horse GI anatomy, I hope it explains why horses are prone to impactions and twisted gut. So while a good quality and consistent feeding regime as well as unrestricted access to clean water and other routine care can help reduce the risk; you may find yourself with a colicking horse anyway and should be prepared to have them treated if necessary.

-Dr. Kathryn Ernst