

Ask A Vet: Most Common Equine Emergency

Sunday, December 8, 2013

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I bought a horse for my daughter a few years ago and fortunately have not had any problems. At a show this past weekend, a friend said that one of their horses colicked and they had to have the vet out. What exactly is colic, and what can be done?

-Curious Horse Owner

Dear Curious,

Colic is simply a broad term meaning abdominal pain. There are many causes and classifications of colic: impaction, entrapment, displacement, gas/spasmodic, torsion (twisting), etc. There are also subsets to several of those categories. The signs usually associated with colic that owners notice can include pacing, sweating, pawing, laying down frequently, rolling, or grinding teeth. If colic is suspected, it is important to call your veterinarian quickly as some of the colics are time sensitive.

Each veterinarian has preferences for how to proceed with working up the colic after arriving at your barn. Discussing any recent history can help determine the cause. Rapid changes in feed, recent deworming, or eating toxic plants can be important things to mention to your vet. The physical examination usually follows and can consist of checking your horse's gum color, listening to heart, lungs, and intestinal sounds, and feeling pulses in your horse's feet. After a baseline physical is done, usually pain medication and sedation is given.

The next step is usually passing a tube into your horse's stomach. It has to be passed up the nose, and then the horse has to swallow it. Once the tube is in the stomach, we listen for gas and check for reflux. Horses cannot vomit, so fluids and gas can build up in their stomach which can be the primary source of pain. This buildup of fluid is known as reflux. Depending on the type of colic suspected, your veterinarian may give fluid, oil, Epsom salts, or other medications via this nasogastric tube.

After tubing, a rectal examination is usually performed (if possible). This exam allows your vet to feel for any possible displacement, twist, or other cause of colic. It is not extremely accurate as we can only feel approximately one-third of the abdomen in a normal sized horse, but a lot of information can still be obtained.

Depending on the physical exam, response to pain medications, findings from passing the tube and rectal palpation, your veterinarian may be able to give you a probable diagnosis and treatment plan. Treatment plans may consist of giving IV fluids or further pain medications. While most colics can be handled on the farm, there are some that must be referred to a surgical center for correction.

While this article could not cover all types and treatments of colic, it will hopefully help you understand what to watch for and what your veterinarian is doing during his or her visit.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman

