

Colic: A Serious Condition, But Not Always a Death Sentence

Dr Chloe Trill, Mixed Animal Veterinarian, Mangawhai

Colic. It's the word no horse owner wants to hear—and with good reason. Almost every horse person has a story about a friend, neighbour, or client who lost a beloved horse to colic. It's long been regarded as one of the most feared equine emergencies. While it certainly can be life-threatening, the truth is that the vast majority of colic cases are treatable and end well—especially when prompt veterinary care is involved.

So, what exactly is colic?

In horses, “colic” is simply a term that means abdominal or gut pain. It's not one specific disease but rather a symptom with a wide variety of potential causes. From a build-up of gas to a twisted bowel, colic can range from mild discomfort to a full-blown medical or surgical crisis. Horses are particularly prone to colic because large portions of their intestines are not firmly attached within the abdomen, allowing them to move more freely and increasing the risk of displacement or twisting. Almost all horses will experience colic at some point in their lives. Fortunately, most of these episodes are mild and respond quickly to treatment.

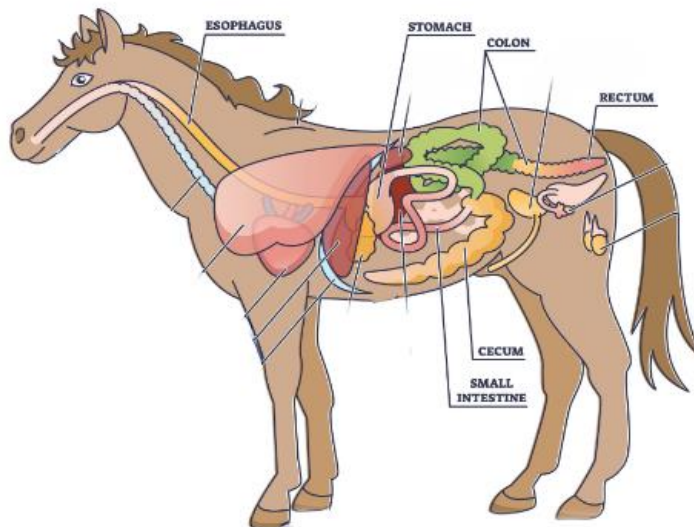


Photo: Horse digestive system

Where does the pain of colic come from? Let's break it down.

Pain in colic arises from several key mechanisms:

- **Distension of the intestines:**
When gas, ingesta, or faecal material builds up in the gut, it stretches the intestinal wall. This activates pain receptors and can lead to significant discomfort. This is commonly seen in gas colic and impaction colic.



- **Abnormal gut motility:**
The normal, wave-like motion of the intestines (peristalsis) can become disrupted. In some cases, this leads to spasmodic colic—sudden, cramp-like contractions of the gut. In more serious cases, the gut may stop moving altogether (ileus), leading to further build-up of material and pain.
- **Tension on the mesentery:**
The mesentery is a sheet of connective tissue that holds the intestines in place within the abdomen. If a section of the intestine becomes twisted or displaced, it puts abnormal tension on the mesentery. This stretching is painful and often occurs in more severe or surgical cases of colic.
- **Inflammation of the intestinal wall or abdominal cavity:**
Conditions such as enteritis (inflammation of the small intestine), colitis (inflammation of the colon), or peritonitis (inflammation of the abdominal lining) cause inflammation and fluid shifts, which stimulate pain receptors and often make the horse appear very sick.
- **Intestinal ischaemia:**
When the blood supply to part of the intestine is cut off—usually due to a twist, displacement, or strangulation—those tissues become deprived of oxygen and start to die. This causes severe, unrelenting pain and is a true emergency requiring surgical intervention.

Common Types and Causes of Colic

A range of issues can cause colic. Below are the most common categories:

1. Gas Colic

This is one of the most frequent and often least serious forms. Horses produce gas as part of normal fermentation in their large intestine. When gas becomes trapped, the resulting pressure can cause significant pain. Sudden diet changes or overeating fermentable feeds (like lush spring pasture) can increase gas production. Gas colic can sometimes resolve with gentle exercise but can also escalate into a surgical emergency if the gut twists.

2. Spasmodic Colic and Ileus

Spasmodic colic results from increased gut motility and painful muscle spasms. Loud gut sounds are often heard. The horse may appear intermittently uncomfortable. Ileus, by contrast, occurs when gut movement stops entirely. With ileus, pain is more constant, and gut sounds may be absent. Causes include stress, infections, diet changes, medications, and parasites.

3. Impaction Colic

This occurs when food or foreign material (e.g. plastic or twine) forms a blockage. Risk factors include high-fibre feed, dehydration, poor dentition, and insufficient exercise. The signs may develop slowly, but the pain can worsen over time. Treatment may include oral fluids, IV fluids, and, in more severe cases, surgery.

4. Sand Colic

Horses grazing on sandy soils (common in Northland) are at risk of ingesting sand, which can accumulate in the colon over time. This causes irritation, chronic discomfort, or complete blockage. Prevention includes feeding from hay nets or rubber mats, avoiding ground feeding, and administering psyllium husks regularly to help clear ingested sand from the gut.

You can test for sand at home by mixing manure in a bucket of water—sand will settle at the bottom.



Photo: Sand within the colon

5. Worm Burden

Heavy parasite loads—especially strongyles—can cause devastating colic by blocking the blood supply to sections of the bowel. Roundworms can cause fatal colic in foals and yearlings. Routine deworming with effective pastes is essential. Tapeworms may also contribute to poor motility and spasmodic colics.

6. Enteroliths

These are intestinal stones that slowly form over time, especially in horses on Lucerne-rich diets or those high in magnesium or nitrogen. Eventually, these stones can obstruct the bowel. Horses may have intermittent colic episodes over months or years before a surgical emergency arises.



Photo: Enteroliths removed from horses

7. Displacements and Twists

Some parts of the horse's intestine are not well anchored and can shift position. Displacements can cause partial blockages, while a twist (volvulus) or entrapment (strangulating obstruction) cuts off blood supply and can kill a portion of the gut within hours. In older horses, lipomas (fatty growths) can become pedunculated and wrap around segments of the intestine. These types of colic are true emergencies that almost always require surgery.

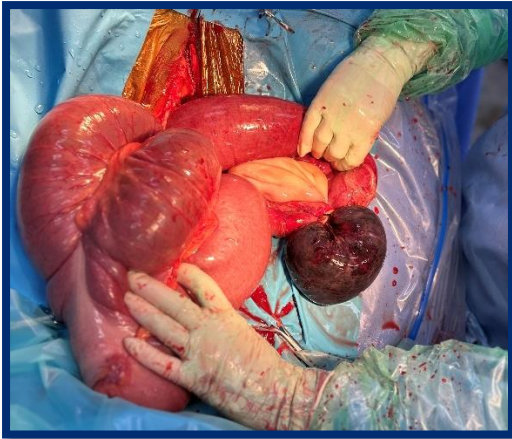


Photo: Pedunculated lipoma causing strangulation of a segment of the small intestine in a 17yo horse

8. Infections

Conditions like colitis (inflammation of the colon), proximal enteritis (infection of the small intestine), or peritonitis (infection of the abdominal cavity) can all cause colic symptoms. These are often accompanied by fever and require intensive treatment.

So, what can we do at home? Recognise the Symptoms

Knowing how to spot the signs early can save your horse's life. Mild colic might look like a quiet horse that's gone off their feed or just seems a little flat. But as pain escalates, so do the symptoms:

- Looking at or biting their flanks
- Repeatedly lying down and getting up
- Curling the upper lip
- Pawing at the ground
- Stretching as if to urinate
- Dog-sitting (hindquarters on the ground, forelimbs extended)
- Rolling, sometimes violently—risking injury or twisted gut
- Sweating, groaning, or distended abdomen
- Changes (or absence) in manure output

Importantly, some horses with severe colic will still pass manure. That doesn't necessarily mean the problem is minor—remember, the transit time from mouth to manure can be days, so what comes out may not reflect what's going wrong.

If you notice any of these signs, don't wait—call your veterinarian immediately—time matters.



Photo: Colicing horse:

What to Do While You Wait

While awaiting veterinary help:

- Remove access to feed and hay.
- Walk the horse if they're restless or trying to roll.
- Avoid allowing them to lie down and roll, as this can worsen a potential twist.
- Never put yourself in harm's way—severely painful horses can thrash violently.
- Do not administer any pain relief unless advised by your vet. These drugs can mask symptoms, making diagnosis more difficult.

What the vet does: Diagnostics:

Veterinarians assess colic severity through:

- Heart rate and gum colour
- Gut sounds
- Rectal examination
- Nasogastric tubing to check for fluid build-up
- Belly tap (peritoneal fluid sampling)
- Blood tests
- Abdominal ultrasound

These diagnostics help determine whether the horse has a medical or surgical case of colic, allowing your veterinarian to formulate an appropriate treatment plan.



Photo: Injected mucous membranes of a critical colic patient

Treatment

Most horses with colic recover with medical treatment:

- Injectable pain relief (NSAIDs)
- Sedation
- Nasogastric fluids/electrolytes or paraffin oil
- Intravenous fluids if dehydrated or impacted

Only a small percentage of colic cases require surgery—but when they do, quick action is critical. Surgical colics include bowel twists, displacements, unresponsive impactions, and enterolith obstructions. Though expensive and high-risk, surgery often offers the only chance of survival in these cases.

Prevention

While some colics are unavoidable, many can be prevented with good management:

- Feed a high-fibre diet and minimise grain
- Provide constant access to clean, fresh water
- Avoid sudden diet changes
- Feed at consistent times
- Don't feed off sandy ground
- Use hay nets or mats for ground feeders
- Exercise your horse regularly
- Maintain regular dental care
- Monitor for worming with faecal egg counts every 8 weeks



- Monitor for sand accumulation if grazing on sandy soils

Final Thoughts

Colic is undeniably serious—but it's not always fatal. The key to a good outcome is early recognition and swift veterinary intervention. Knowing the signs, having a plan, and managing your horse's health proactively will go a long way in keeping your equine companion safe, sound, and comfortable.

If your horse ever shows signs of colic, **don't wait—call your vet immediately**. It could save their life.