

Be prepared to tackle colic head on to help your horse's recovery



How to beat colic

Vet Danny Chambers explains colic and how to create a life-saving emergency plan



OUR EXPERT

VET DANNY CHAMBERS graduated from Liverpool University in 2008, has an MSc in Infectious Disease Control and a particular interest in colic. Danny regularly volunteers in India and Africa to help working horses.

Colic is the number one cause of death in horses and a major cause of concern for every horse owner. It's also one of the most misunderstood equine conditions, causing lots of confusion, stress and panic when it strikes, often late at night, and especially when the case is severe. Understandably in these

What exactly is colic?

Colic means abdominal pain, or belly ache – it's a symptom indicating that something's wrong in the abdomen, not a disease in itself. There are many causes, from issues with the gastrointestinal tract (the gut) or liver, kidney and other internal organ problems, to peritonitis (infection of the abdomen) and giving birth. Typically when vets use the term colic they're referring to problems with the

circumstances, many owners find themselves struggling to make quick decisions when their vet is pushing them to choose whether to manage with medication, refer for surgery, or to euthanase. It's this decision making in the early stages of the condition that can mean the difference between life and death.

Fortunately, there are plenty of ways to ensure you're ready to handle colic and, with this knowledge in the bank, the panic and stress will be greatly reduced. This will enable you and your vet to take faster and more appropriate courses of action. So read on to get up to date with colic and how to handle it.

gastrointestinal tract itself where the food passes through and is digested. The gastrointestinal tract includes the stomach, small intestine, caecum and the colon. In horses, its design means it has a tendency to go wrong in many different ways. Should your horse start to show signs of belly ache, they can be subtle but may include:

- Not eating
- Pawing at the ground

- Turning his head around to look at his belly
- Kicking at his belly
- Lying down and standing up repeatedly
- Rolling
- Curling the lip
- Sweating
- Stretching out as if to urinate
- Lying on his back
- Depression

What are the different types of colic?

There are approximately 70 different types of problem that can occur in the equine intestine but broadly speaking these can be split into two groups:

- **Medical colics** These can be treated by administering various medications, fluids, lungeing and sometimes a combination of all three
- **Surgical colics** Surgery is required to correct them and prevent fatalities

Medical colics explained

More than 90% of the colic cases attended by vets are medical and don't require surgery. The most common of these is called spasmodic colic, when the small intestine goes into spasm. It can be very painful and often comes in waves but can normally be settled with medication. Impaction colic occurs when there's a blockage of dried up food in the large colon and can be resolved with plenty of fluids, medication and starving the horse.

Surgical colics explained

There are a variety of surgical conditions in which the horse's

intestine wraps around his pendunculated lipomas (these are fat lumps that older horses commonly develop), get trapped through holes between internal organs (called foramina) or when the whole large colon displaces or twists on itself in what's known as a torsion.

In many surgical colics, part of the gut loses blood supply and starts dying, causing toxins to enter into the bloodstream and blood to leak into the abdomen. In these cases surgery is required to untwist and remove any damaged intestine. Unsuccessful colic surgery is most common when the horse doesn't make it to the operating table in time – the time taken for the horse to deteriorate will depend on how much of his gut is compromised. If a small amount of gut is involved, then the horse may have several hours. In the case of a large colon torsion, where a huge amount of gut is twisted around on itself, the horse needs to be on the operating table within four hours to stand a chance of surviving.



A horse might roll if he's suffering from belly ache

Surgical or a medical – how can you tell?

All the different types of colic simply present as stomach pain, which makes it very hard to tell the difference between medical and surgical cases.

Frustratingly, milder-looking colics aren't always medical and the violent, rolling, sweating colics aren't always surgical. However, as a rule of thumb, the more dramatic colics are, the more likely they are to be surgical. To determine the type your vet will:

✓ **Take your horse's heart rate** A high heart rate can indicate elevated pain and toxins leaking into the blood

✓ **Listen to the gut sounds** Very loud gut sounds are typical of a spasmodic colic, whereas an absence of gut sounds may indicate a twist

✓ **Check the colour of the horse's gums** White gums mean blood could be leaking into the abdomen, purple gums indicate that toxins are leaking into the blood stream

✓ **Perform a rectal examination** This allows the vet to feel inside the abdomen for impactions, a torsion or a gas build up that may indicate a twist further forward

✓ **Pass a tube through the nose and down into the stomach** If there's a twist of the gut, often the stomach can't empty itself so fluid builds up. Horses can't vomit excess fluid out, which means they can be at risk of a fatal stomach rupture in this situation. If a lot of fluid is released from the stomach when the tube is passed, this could indicate the need for surgery as well as providing instant pain relief for the horse as the pressure's released

✓ **Note his reaction to pain killers** If strong pain relief has been given but the horse continues to show signs of discomfort, this alone may be reason enough to refer to a surgical facility



A rectal exam is the most useful test your vet can do to determine whether surgery is needed

Your colic surgery questions answered



Whatever decisions you make when faced with colic, be sure they're right for you and your horse – no one else

Q Is colic surgery for me?

A It's wise to decide before your horse even has colic whether surgery is a route you'd go down. You can even discuss it with your vet the next time you see them. This saves the precious time spent considering the options or raising the finances at 11pm at night while your horse is in pain.

Also, remember that every colic is different. When faced with the decision to refer it's common to hear someone on the

yard say: "My horse had colic surgery and died. It's a waste of money." This is misleading as there are so many variables, including the type of colic, what part of the gut had twisted or displaced, if any of the intestine had to be removed, how long the horse had been colicking for before he made it to the operating table, and many more. Always make your decisions based on discussions with your vet about your horse's case.

Recovery from colic surgery involves lengthy box or confined paddock rest



Q What happens after surgery?

A At Liverpool University about 80% of horses return home after colic surgery. Most of these would be expected to return to their previous level of work, although this could take around six months post surgery.

For approximately four months the

horse would require stable and very small paddock rest. Understandably some owners would decide that an old horse would not be a good candidate for surgery given the stress of the operation and the prolonged recovery time they'd have to go through post afterwards.

Q Will my insurance cover it?

A For many horse owners the high cost of surgery will quickly rule it out as an option. However, many also insure their horses and this certainly helps greatly with the large financial cost. If you'd want your horse to have the option of colic surgery and your horse isn't currently insured, now's the ideal time to look for a good insurance policy that will give you the option.

• **For more advice on insurance and understanding the jargon used, turn to page 108 where Buyers' Guide editor Allison Lowther delves into equine insurance to help you find the right insurance policy for your horse.**



You can research equine insurance options online

Q How much will it cost?

A Colic surgery is expensive, there's no getting away from that. A large team of vets and nurses are required to perform the surgery, to perform and monitor the anaesthetic and recovery (which can be as difficult as the surgery itself when dealing with a very sick patient), and to provide post-operative intensive care if necessary. This is all very labour intensive and requires a hospital fitted with the latest facilities and equipment. As a result of all of this, surgery can cost between £4,000 and £7,000 depending on the number of post surgical complications and the duration of your horse's hospital stay.



While waiting for your vet, move your horse to an appropriate area for the vet to check him over

Your colic action plan

Whether surgical or medical, all colics present the same way in the initial stages so vets will treat all colics as an emergency. Remember, if your horse shows any signs it's best to get him checked out sooner rather than later.

This is because if a surgical colic isn't seen for several hours it may be too late to be able to do anything about it and should surgery be necessary, there may be a travel time of several hours between you and your nearest surgical centre, making early examination absolutely vital for your horse.

Speed up your vet's arrival

None of the following tips have anything to do with colic but could get your vet to your horse much quicker.

Make sure you know the postcode of your yard to give to your vet for their sat nav. A new vet in the practice may not be familiar with the area and won't know the names of the local villages so directions aren't always helpful. Even if a sat nav doesn't take them to the door, getting to within a mile or two can save precious time.

Give your vet a phone number that you can be contacted on, especially if they'll need directions to get to you. If your phone has no signal on your yard, give the mobile number of a friend who does, or a landline at the premises.

If there's no sign indicating the name of the premises, or if you're in a field in the middle of nowhere, have someone stand on the road to signal to the vet.

Take action

While your vet is making their way to you, follow these six steps to ensure your vet and your horse have everything needed for fast, effective examination:

1 If your horse is in the middle of a field, walk him to somewhere with light water and less mud to make your vet's job easier.

2 Have a couple of buckets of clean and ideally lukewarm water ready. If your horse needs to have water administered into his stomach via a stomach tube cold dirty water is a definite no.

3 Have some straw or shavings bales to put behind your horse in case your vet needs to do a rectal exam. This will help prevent the horse from kicking the vet (even the most well-behaved, kind horse may kick if your vet palpates a painful part of the gut during the rectal exam).

4 Some horses will try to lie down or roll when colic strikes and it can be beneficial to gently walk them around to prevent them from getting cast in the stable or injuring themselves on the walls.

5 Sometimes horses in a lot of pain will try to violently throw themselves on the ground. This is very dangerous so don't try to prevent it – if you get injured you won't be able to help him at all.

Instead, turn him out into a manege or sandschool and simply let him roll. It's a common myth that rolling can cause a gut to twist. This is not correct and rolling won't make colic worse.

6 Should surgery be necessary, you'll need transport for your horse that's ready to drive and someone to drive it.

If you don't have your own transport, make an arrangement with a friend today so that should your horse ever need surgery they can drive you, whatever the time of day or night. 🐾