



**OUR EXPERT**  
Dr Imogen Burrows



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# Coping with colic

**Having a horse with colic is alarming, but the condition is often treatable, says equine vet Imogen Burrows. Here, she shares the signs to look out for and discusses treatment options**

**“Y**our horse has colic” is a sentence that every horse owner fears. But what does “having colic” actually mean?

Colic is the medical term for abdominal pain. It is generally caused by problems within the gastrointestinal tract. However, horses may experience ‘false colic’, where they exhibit the same signs due to pain from other body systems.

Examples of this include severe laminitis, azoturia (tying-up), abortion and liver disease.

The nature, severity and duration of the colic signs, along with additional information you can provide – such as the horse’s feeding regime, worming history and age – can help the vet draw up a list of likely causes.

## Warning signs

Horses can exhibit a varied range of signs, depending on the degree and cause of pain.

Mild colic signs are subtle and include restlessness or dullness and stretching out, as if to urinate. Flank watching and lip curling may also be observed. As pain increases, the horse can start pawing the ground, pacing and may sweat and lie down or roll.

Severe colic can result in attempts to roll or thrash about, and the horse could suffer an injury, especially to the head. Horses with evidence of self-trauma from a recent colic, but who now appear to be calm but dull and depressed, should be viewed with caution. Gut rupture may relieve the extreme pain but cause endotoxaemia, resulting in shock.

## Finding out what’s wrong

The good news is the vast majority of colics are caused by intestinal cramps (spasmodic colic) or a build up of gas (tympenic colic) associated with a change in management or diet.

Owners often observe waves of pain and some horses may improve with walking.

It is recommended the horse is examined by a vet. Prompt assessment and treatment will reduce distress for the horse and will provide you with much needed reassurance.

Occasionally, additional diagnostic techniques, such as a rectal examination, may be necessary to identify the cause of the pain.

Internal palpation may identify blockages (impactions), displaced and/or distended bowel.

If gut contents stops moving due to a blockage, twist or cessation of peristalsis, it will back up into the stomach. As horses cannot vomit, the increase in stomach volume is very painful and can result in rupture. A tube may be passed up the nose and into the stomach to syphon off excess fluid to prevent this.

Other tests include ultrasonography and blood samples. They may need to be repeated and

A horse with colic may look at his flanks



compared throughout the course of the colic, to gauge progress and response to treatment.

## Treating colic

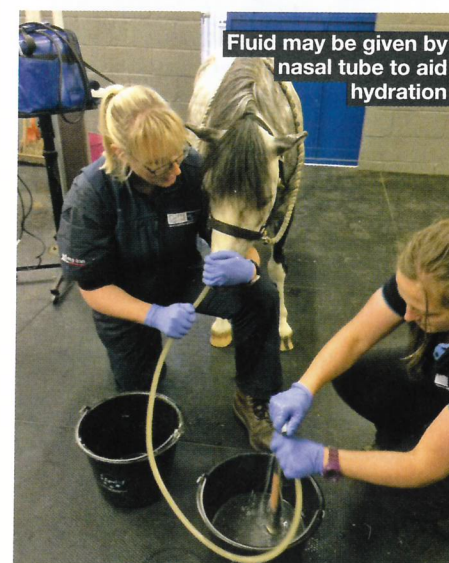
Most colic cases will resolve following one treatment, usually comprised of ‘spasmolytic’ and painkilling injections. Oral fluid therapy is essential for impaction colics.

You may be advised to take your horse to a veterinary clinic for monitoring, further tests or treatment. This might not reflect the severity of the case but can speed up diagnosis or treatment of the underlying problem.

Other treatments may be needed depending on the diagnosis made. For example, colic caused by gastric ulcers need specific anti-ulcer, gastroprotective medications; whereas the aborting mare will require very different treatment again.

Colic surgery as a treatment option is relatively rare. However, provided your horse is seen promptly and referred to the appropriate facility in a timely manner, surgery often has good results.

Risks of surgery include wound infection, breakdown or herniation, intestinal adhesions, endotoxaemia, peritonitis and complications from anaesthesia. But, in many cases, these risks are well worth the benefit of saving your horse’s life. ■



## Enhance your skills with XLEquine

XLEquine is a group of independent equine veterinary practices who work together to share experience, knowledge and skills, to deliver the highest standards of equine healthcare.

Member practices have developed a series of EquineSkills workshops to provide up-to-date, practical healthcare training to horse owners.

The workshops are endorsed by the Association of British Riding Schools.

### What are EquineSkills workshops?

These practical training courses are led in a friendly and informal environment. Each one takes place in an interactive and engaging learning environment to ensure attendees gain new, useable skills.

### Who are the teachers?

Uniquely, our large team of equine vets and nurses deliver all of our workshops. This means you have the peace of mind that the knowledge you receive is current and from a reliable, trusted source.

All of the course leaders are accredited trainers, ensuring workshop standards are consistently high.

### Who can attend?

The simple answer is – you! EquineSkills workshops cater for all levels of horse ownership, from new owners to experienced riders, coaches and equine paraprofessionals.

Our trainers are experienced in teaching delegates at different levels of

knowledge and experience, and tailor workshops accordingly.

If you love horses and want to increase your practical skills and knowledge, EquineSkills workshops are for you!

### The topics

Six workshops are currently available:-

- Understanding Your Horse’s Back;
- First Aid for Your Horse;
- Old Friends and Saying Goodbye;
- How Do Horses Learn?
- Equine Foot Care;
- The Guts of the Matter.

All delegates receive a comprehensive workbook to take home, to consolidate new knowledge and skills learned, as well as a certificate of attendance.

### New for 2015

‘The Guts of the Matter’ workshop is new this year. It covers diseases affecting the gut and will help you understand how to manage horses with special dietary needs.

Whether you have a competition horse in training, a good-doer who suffers mild bouts of laminitis or a retired veteran, this course is for you.

The practical session will enable you to body condition score your horse and create an appropriate nutrition plan so he safely loses, maintains or gains weight as necessary. You will go home with a factbook and an XLEquine weigh tape to monitor your horse’s weight.

● For more information or to book a course, visit: [equineskills.co.uk](http://equineskills.co.uk).

