

Dear Dr. Wise,
My neighbor told me her horse had colic. What is "colic"?

Colic, in its simplest form means abdominal pain. Abdominal pain can have many areas of origin including the digestive tract, urinary system, or the inner or outer layers of the horse's body wall. However, the most common disturbance is usually localized to the digestive tract. There are many signs you may notice when your horse has colic including restlessness, pawing, lying down and getting up repeatedly, sweating, stretching as if they are going to urinate but then do not, rolling, looking at their sides, and/or kicking at their belly. Some common causes of colic are that the horse's intestines get blocked so gas and fluid accumulate and their digested food can no longer pass through, or the intestines can become twisted, which depending on the direction of the twist, is commonly called a torsion or a volvulus. The majority of colic cases will respond well to medical therapy, but they may also develop into medical emergencies and require surgery. Whenever an owner or handler notices signs of colic as noted above, a veterinarian should be called to ensure the best possible prognosis for the animal's situation. However, some signs that your horse may require surgery instead of only medical therapy include that the pain is continuous and had a rapid onset, the abdomen appears swollen or distended, or the pain does not respond to only medical therapy.

As stated before, surgical colics are an EMERGENCY and require immediate attention. Not all colics are preventable, but there are actions that can be taken to lessen the chances your horse will become "colicky." Parasites can block the digestive tract when present in high numbers, so it is imperative to have your horse on a good parasite control program. It is also important to minimize stress in your animal, while providing a good, healthy diet and always having fresh water available. Also, when horses have bad teeth, they don't chew their food properly and this can cause problems in the digestion process, which could also lead to colic. Make sure there is nothing in the horse's pasture or stall that it shouldn't eat. Sand can also cause problems if eaten while the animal is trying to graze on pasture. The keys to colic cases are prevention, early recognition, and action upon realizing your horse has colic. Your veterinarian will then evaluate the horse and determine the most appropriate method of action to help your horse recover.