Colic: causes, risk factors and prevention

COLIC describes the behavioural signs associated with abdominal pain. Broadly speaking, when first assessing a horse with colic it is necessary to differentiate between those that are associated with the gastrointestinal tract and “false colic”, i.e. those conditions that present to us as colic but do not involve the gastrointestinal tract (such as laminitis, ovarian disease and bladder stones).

For the purposes of this article we shall be focusing on causes of colic involving the gastrointestinal tract.

A horse that is colicking can do so for many reasons and so clinical signs can vary greatly. Different stages of colic can present in a number of ways and one horse will not always look the same way as another suffering from the same condition.

Generally, signs of colic in horses can be divided into those of mild, moderate and severe pain and can include one or all of the following: horses in mild pain can show pawing at the ground, flank watching, curling their lip or just not settling; moderate pain can present as an animal rolling occasionally, restlessness and lying down for prolonged periods; severe pain can present as intense pawing at the ground, sweating up, violent rolling and self-trauma is often noted from damage sustained.

Pain in colic is generally a result of either stretching or distension of the intestines with gas/fluid/food; unco-ordinated contraction or spasm of the intestines; loss of blood supply to a length of intestine or stretching of the mesentery.

Types and causes

Defining the type of colic involved enables the most appropriate treatment and prognosis to be established. Causes of colic associated with the small intestine can include pedunculated lipoma, ileal impaction, herniation, grass sickness, epiploic foramen entrapment and enteritis.

Causes of colic associated with the large intestine can include pelvic flexure impaction, displacement, tympany, volvulus and sand impaction.

Spasmodic colic is the most common colic encountered (Proudman, 1992), is often mild and typically lasts a couple of hours. Loud gut sounds are often heard over large areas of the gastrointestinal tract and will respond well to gut relaxants and pain killers.

Although numerous factors are linked to spiking an episode of spasmodic colic, high parasite burdens and sudden changes in diet are most frequently implicated.

For cases of simple colic, there are no gender differences as these cases are generally a result of management issues.

Proudman (1992) showed that middle-aged horses were more at risk than young or old horses but older horses are more likely to suffer from ileocolic intussusceptions and older horses are more likely to suffer from pedunculated lipoma.

References


