

## Making the Colic Call

**A veterinary expert explains how to decide when a colicky horse needs professional attention.**

*By Nancy S. Loving, DVM*

**Q.** What is your advice regarding when to call out the vet if you suspect that your horse is colicking? Do you have some general guidelines on this?

**A.** Colic can be a serious and life-threatening condition if there is any compromise to the bowel or the blood supply to the bowel. For this reason, contact your vet for a colic that doesn't resolve on its own (without drugs) after about an hour. During this time period, you can do a few things: First, take his vital signs. Get his rectal temperature, heart rate, and evaluate his mucous membrane color, capillary refill time, and listen for intestinal sounds on both sides of his flanks. Knowing your horse's normal vital signs gives you a basis of comparison when he is acting ill. Record this information and continually update it as the colic progresses, and relay this data to your vet when you call. Then your vet will have a good idea of how urgent the colic might be and how quickly veterinary attention needs to be delivered.

Another thing you can do is put your horse on a longeline or in the round pen and move him at a vigorous trot for 10 to 15 minutes, provided he doesn't have a musculoskeletal problem that requires strict rest. Sometimes the jiggling motion of a steady trot will work some gas bubbles through his system and resolve the bellyache.

Any unrelenting or severe pain necessitates immediate professional veterinary care. If your horse is only mildly painful, depressed or off feed, then you might have the luxury of monitoring him for an hour or two before requesting a visit from your vet. A horse in distress for more than an hour should receive immediate vet care. It is always better to implement rapid veterinary treatment so that a problem is forestalled early on. Veterinary treatment with pain medications and oral or intravenous fluids helps maintain intestinal motility and hydration; however, not all colic is related to intestinal issues, and a thorough veterinary exam on a colicky horse can rule in or out other serious problems.

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