

# COLIC IN DONKEYS

Prevention is better than cure.

 17 November 2017 [Read on The Donkey Sanctuary website](#)

Colic can be extremely serious and early treatment is vital. Make sure you know the causes and signs so you can act quickly if your donkey becomes ill.

Severe colic can be fatal. Remember that prevention is always better than cure.

## WHAT IS COLIC?

Colic is a symptom of abdominal pain, commonly in the gastrointestinal tract (such as the stomach or intestine). It can also be due to pain in other organs, such as the kidneys, ovaries or bladder.

There are many different kinds of colic, including:

- Impaction or blockage of the intestine with partly digested food, foreign bodies (such as plastic bags), or parasites (worms)
- Muscle spasms in the wall of the intestine (spasmodic colic)
- A build-up of gas (gassy colic)
- Torsion (twisting) of part of the intestine (twisted gut)
- Painful conditions, such as stomach ulcers, tumours, or pancreatitis.

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF COLIC?

Call your vet immediately if you suspect your donkey is unwell. A dull donkey is a veterinary emergency.

Due to their stoic nature, donkeys usually show less dramatic signs of colic than those seen in horses. A donkey with colic may simply become dull and unwilling to eat. However, less dramatic signs do not mean the donkey is in less pain.

Signs of colic may include:

- Dullness
- Lying down
- Lack of appetite or refusing to eat
- Weight shifting, usually between the hind legs
- Rolling and pawing at the ground (rare in donkeys, can indicate a serious problem)
- Fast breathing, rapid heart rate
- Sweating
- Brick red or pale gums or insides of eyelids
- Dry or tacky gums
- Lack of, or reduction in, the normal quantity of droppings
- Self-isolating or moving away from companions.

## HOW IS COLIC TREATED?

A vet must treat colic, do not try to treat it yourself. If you suspect colic, call your vet at once and follow their advice.

Your vet may carry out the following to try to diagnose the type of colic:

- Checking your donkey's heart rate and temperature
- Listening to your donkey's abdomen with a stethoscope to check the gut sounds
- Checking your donkey's teeth
- Taking a blood sample
- Performing a rectal examination
- Passing a stomach (nasogastric) tube to check for reflux (backed up food or fluid).

Your vet will decide on the best treatment based on your donkey's diagnosis and are likely to give painkillers. Depending on their findings, your vet may give your donkey fluids via a nasogastric tube or put them on a 'drip' (usually via the large vein in their neck). It may take multiple visits from your vet to treat your donkeys colic.

Your donkey may need to be hospitalised if their case is severe. If your donkey is hospitalised, their companion must go too, as hospitalisation can be very stressful for donkeys. Some types of colic need surgery to resolve them, which will require prompt transport to a hospital.

Surgery carries a high risk in most colic cases and involves considerable nursing care and cost. Check you are insured for the costs and talk to your vet about the chances of success.

**Euthanasia** may be the kindest option if your donkey's case is serious.

It is common for donkey's with colic to develop **hyperlipaemia** due to lack of appetite. Early recognition and treatment of colic is vital.

## WHAT CAUSES COLIC, AND HOW CAN IT BE PREVENTED?

Colic is so dangerous because by the time your donkey lets you know it has colic, it may be too late to save it. The old adage, 'prevention is better than cure', definitely applies.

Observe your donkey daily, looking for any changes in behaviour. Know what typical dung looks like. Be aware of the average number of piles of droppings your donkeys pass each day and the consistency. Persistently very loose or very dry droppings could be indicative of colic, particularly if other symptoms appear. Check your donkey's breathing pattern so you will be able to spot any change.

## POSSIBLE CAUSES AND MANAGEMENT

### FEED - SUDDEN CHANGES TO DIET, POOR QUALITY FEED, TOO MUCH GRASS, FEEDING CEREALS:

- Make any dietary changes gradually over at least a week, ideally 2-4 weeks
- Feed good quality forage and donkey specific proprietary feeds
- Avoid mouldy feed
- Always soak sugar beet to the manufacturer's recommendations
- Feed little and often, especially if your donkey has additional feed
- Do not allow your donkey access to too much rich spring grass.

For more information, please see [our advice on feeding donkeys](#).

### INADEQUATE OR DIRTY WATER SUPPLY:

- Check troughs daily. Self-filling drinkers can become blocked, or the water supply can fail
- Clean dirty water containers as donkeys will not drink dirty water
- Check water is not frozen or too cold. Many donkeys will not drink very cold water
- Offer several sources of water.

### EATING NON-FOOD ITEMS SUCH AS PLASTIC BAGS, ROPE OR BEDDING:

- Ensure your donkeys cannot access non-food items
- Change your donkey's bedding to something less palatable, such as wood shavings
- Do not use cardboard or paper bedding.

### EATING POISONOUS PLANTS:

- Know your [poisonous plants and trees](#)
- Remove poisonous plants or fence off the problem area
- Check pasture, boundary fences and hedgerows frequently
- Fence off trees when fruiting to prevent your donkey gorging.

## SANDY SOIL:

- Avoid grazing on sandy soil pasture if possible.

## DENTAL DISEASE - FAILURE TO CHEW FOOD ADEQUATELY RESULTING IN A BLOCKAGE OF THE GUT:

- Have your donkey's teeth checked at least annually by a qualified equine dental technician or vet
- Dental disease is more common in older donkeys
- Suspect dental problems if donkeys are 'quidding' (dropping part chewed feed) or drooling saliva
- Please read our information on [donkey dental care](#).

## PARASITES - WORMS CAUSING OBSTRUCTION OR INFLAMMATION OF THE GUT:

- Arrange regular faecal worm egg counts to [check if your donkey needs treating for worms](#)
- Speak to your vet for advice
- Clear droppings from your donkey's paddock at least twice a week.

## STOMACH ULCERS:

- Keep stress to a minimum
- Trickle feed your donkey.

## PAIN - ANY PAINFUL CONDITION CAN LEAD TO COLIC, INCLUDING SEVERE LAMENESS:

- Ensure your donkey has adequate pain relief if they have a painful condition.

## MORE **INFORMATION**

Our skilled and experienced team of welfare advisers are on hand to give advice and appropriate support during office hours. If you're having problems caring for your donkeys or mules, [contact our welfare team](#).