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Impaction Colic

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Colic is often a capital C word dreaded by horse owners. Colic is a fairly broad term that refers to abdominal pain caused by an abnormal condition affecting the stomach, cecum or intestines. More specifically, impaction colic refers to blockage (complete or partial) of the stomach, cecum or intestines, such that feed taken into the mouth cannot pass through the gastrointestinal tract and exit at the anus.

Signs of colic can include anorexia, restlessness, pawing, kicking/looking at abdomen (belly), pacing, sweating, lying down frequently, rolling, grunting, and abdominal bloat. If your horse is showing any of these signs, a call to your veterinarian is warranted.

The vet's exam usually begins with history taking. Commonly asked questions include: when was the horse last de-wormed, what type of feed is he on, has there been a feed or environmental change recently, what source of water is available, and has he colicked before. Following history, a thorough exam is performed where parameters like heart rate and gut sounds are assessed. Blood is often collected to analyse the red blood cell count and protein level in the blood, which is a good way to check for dehydration. Sometimes fluid is collected from the abdomen to be analysed for cell type and protein level, which is helpful in determining the severity of the colic. Next, a rectal exam is performed to assess the location of the small and large intestine, and check for impaction or enlargement/distension of the bowel. Finally, a tube is passed through the nose to

the stomach. Because a horse cannot vomit, passing this nasogastric tube allows any built up fluid (reflux) to be taken off the stomach. If there is no net reflux then medications can be administered through the nasogastric tube.

When an impaction is diagnosed, a variety of therapies can be applied. Placing the horse on intravenous fluids is very helpful to correct dehydration and to provide over hydration such that fluid spills over into the intestines to soften the impaction. Several different medications can be administered through the nasogastric tube: mineral oil helps loosen and impaction, DSS helps break up built up gas in the intestine, and Epsom salts act to draw water into the intestines helping to loosen the impaction. In addition anti-inflammatories are routinely given to reduce the horse's pain. Most impactions can be treated with medical therapy, as described above, but severe cases may require surgery.

Impaction colic can be caused by a number of different factors and several factors may play a role. These include stress, dehydration, a feed change or inappropriate feed (i.e. straw), ingested foreign body, parasite overload, intestinal motility disorder and dental disease. Horse owners can help prevent impaction colic through a variety of management strategies. Providing an abundant, readily available source of fresh water at all time, that is heated in the winter, helps prevent dehydration. In addition, some horses do not like to drink in the winter when it gets really cold. They eat lots of hay because this is how they stay warm, but do not drink very much. This scenario is perfect for setting up an impaction colic. Feeding some loose salt in grain can make your horse thirsty and encourage him to drink more in cold weather. Feeding good quality hay and making feed changes gradually also reduce the risk of impaction colic. Finally, regular dental care and a de-worming program will help maintain a healthy horse with a reduced risk of colic.

If you have any questions about colic or horse health care feel free to contact the Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic, 782-1080.