

## COLIC IN DONKEYS

### What is colic?

Colic is abdominal pain, “belly-ache”.

### Signs that a donkey has colic

The presenting signs of colic that are seen in donkeys are often different from those seen in horses and ponies. Whereas horses and ponies frequently show signs like rolling, lying down and pawing the ground, donkeys tend to be much more stoical. The main or only signs that a donkey has colic can be that the behaviour changes to dullness and unwillingness to eat.

Of course, colic is not the only reason why a donkey may look dull. But research at The Donkey Sanctuary suggests that almost 20% of donkeys reported to its Veterinary Department as being dull did in fact have colic.

Any of the following signs should cause concern:

- Dullness – most commonly the first sign.
- Lack of appetite or refusing to eat.
- Rolling and pawing at the ground (if the donkey has colic, one or more other symptoms will usually be present).
- Fast breathing.
- Excessive sweating.
- Colour of gums or inside eyelid – brick red colour is a poor sign.
- Lack of droppings.

If you see these signs or suspect that your donkey is unwell, call your vet immediately! Give the vet any information that you have, together with the symptoms the donkey is showing. If possible, try to establish the cause and tell the vet when you call him or her. Monitor the donkey’s condition and behaviour while you are waiting. When he or she arrives, the vet might:

- Check the heart rate.
- Take the temperature.
- Listen to the abdomen with a stethoscope to check the gut sounds.
- Take a blood sample.
- Ask you about what the animal has been eating.
- Do a rectal examination.

It all depends how serious the vet decides it is, and what type of colic the vet thinks it may be.

### Causes of colic

Colic, being a symptom rather than a disease, can have many causes. There are also “false colics” that cause pain in the belly, but do not involve the digestive tract. Examples include pain from birth contractions or problems with internal organs. However, any suspicion of colic requires immediate veterinary attention.

Colic can be caused by:

- Feed; sudden changes to the diet, poor quality feed, too much rich grass and too much grain can all cause colic. In some circumstances, housed donkeys eat their bedding, which can be a cause of colic.
- Eating strange things; if donkeys eat things like polythene bags or pieces of rope they may get colic.
- Bad teeth; like horses, donkeys’ teeth continue to grow throughout their lives. Sometimes problems develop that reduce the ability to properly chew food.
- Eating sandy soil; donkeys may eat sand especially when grazing on sandy soil with little grass.
- Water; lack of access to water can make donkeys more vulnerable to colic. In cold weather, when water becomes cold or even frozen, donkeys’ water intake may be reduced.
- Worms; the migration in the body of larval stages of parasites or large numbers of adult worms in the guts can cause colic.
- Poisoning; eating poisonous plants can cause colic.
- Stress; some donkeys do not deal with certain stressful situations as well as others and may show signs of colic.

Your vet will try to diagnose the type of colic, but it is not always possible. The following kinds of colic (not an exhaustive list) are sometimes seen:

- Impactions or blockages with partially digested food. These occur most frequently in parts of the large intestine.
- Muscle cramps (spasmodic colic). Appears to be a more common type of colic in horses, but rarer in donkeys.
- Gas colic (flatulent colic).
- Tumours in the abdomen, particularly in older donkeys.
- Obstructions with “foreign bodies” such as plastic bags (more common abroad than in UK).
- Twisted guts (torsion).
- Stomach ulcers.
- Worms: tapeworms or roundworms.
- Pancreatitis. A very serious inflammation of the pancreas.

### **Treatment for colic**

Do not attempt to treat the donkey yourself, give it a feed or any drugs. Treatment depends on the cause diagnosed by the vet. The vet may decide to use a stomach tube, give intravenous fluids (“drip”) or give injections, such as painkillers or antibiotics. De-worming may be indicated depending on the donkey’s recent treatments against worms. Rarely, surgery is required. Sadly, in some cases, the appropriate action is euthanasia.

### **Preventing colic**

Colic is important because by the time a 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.

Occasionally, despite taking every precaution, some animals will get colic. However, the following practices will help to reduce the probability:

- Observe your donkey(s) daily, looking for any changes in behaviour. Remember, in The Donkey Sanctuary research study, it was found that around a fifth of the donkeys recorded as dull had colic.
- Be aware of the average number of piles of droppings your donkey(s) pass each day as well as the consistency. Persistently very loose or very dry dropping could be indicative of colic particularly if other symptoms appear.
- Follow good feeding practices. Ensure regular feeding: little and often is best. Greedy over-feeding of a large meal can lead to a fully stuffed stomach resulting in “gastric impaction”.
- Avoid access to too much rich spring grass. This can be associated with “spasmodic colic”, or cramps in the guts.
- Avoid access to grain and other rich feed. Rich feeds, particularly those that are high in starch and sugar, can cause laminitis, which usually requires reduced feeding and can then lead to “impaction colic”.
- Avoid unsoaked sugar-beet pulp, which can swell after eating.
- Check water is not frozen or too cold. If it is, it may discourage the donkey from drinking it, and this can be a contributory factor to impaction.
- Regularly check your paddocks and hedgerows for poisonous plants and remove them or fence off the area.
- Follow a worming programme according to the advice of your vet. Picking up manure from the paddock on a daily basis reduces access to worm eggs.
- Watch out for the donkey eating its bedding, for example, when box-rested under veterinary instruction. Consider changing the bedding to something less palatable, such as shredded newspaper or wood shavings.
- Have a vet or equine dental technician check your donkey’s teeth at least once a year. Dental disease is more common in older donkeys. Suspect teeth problems if donkeys are “quidding” (dropping part chewed feed) or drooling saliva. Failure to properly chew fibrous feed like straw can lead to impactions.

In general, remember to keep to a routine. Sudden changes of management can cause colic. Remember too that donkeys are stoical creatures that do not make a lot of fuss when they have a pain in the belly, so by the time they let you know there is a problem it can already be serious.