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Chronic Colic

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ROCKS and ROLLS - Chronic Colic in Horses

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What is chronic colic?

When we refer to the colic pain being CHRONIC, that is defined as pain that is present constantly or intermittently for more than 3 days. Often time these episodes are mild to moderate in severity and may resolve for hours to days in-between episodes. During these in-between times, the horse may be completely normal (attitude, appetite, activity).

There are many differentials to consider when a horse is experiencing chronic colic. The following are all possibilities (but this list is not inclusive): ulcers (stomach or colon), abdominal mass (abscess or neoplasia), adhesions, impaction, enterolith, sand or gravel in the colon, displacement of the colon, peritonitis, or any other non-GI cause.

Basic diagnostic work-up

- History and Complete and thorough physical examination
- Complete ultrasound examination – small and large intestine, fluid, masses or abscesses, evaluation of organs, thorax
- Laboratory work – CBC, fibrinogen, serum chemistry profile, fecal float

Special diagnostics

- Gastroscopy
- Radiographs – enterolith, sand, or gravel
- Absorption test – diagnostic for IBD
- Intestinal biopsy
- Abdominocentesis
- Laparoscopy – minimally invasive; can be performed in the standing horse
- Abdominal exploratory

Chronic colic conclusions

There are many, many different causes of chronic colic in horses. Because of all the different causes, there are many diagnostic tests that can be performed. These are usually recommended in a step-wise fashion. Many of these tests have the ability to rule out certain diseases rather than give a specific diagnosis. It can take some time to figure out what is causing the pain in an affected horse and this can be frustrating for both the owner and the veterinarian. The prognosis for horses with chronic colic depends on what the underlying cause is and if there is an appropriate treatment available.