

COLIC SURGERY



What is Colic?

Colic is simply a horse's way of showing abdominal pain. This pain usually comes from the abdomen but can come from other organs as well. The horse's intestinal tract is very complex, with many structures that can get themselves into trouble. Colic signs include depression, loss of appetite, lying down, pawing, rolling, kicking at the belly, looking at the side, stretching and many others.

There are a number of potential causes for colic. Most of them are simple, like a spasm or gas in the intestine. Most horses that experience abdominal pain will resolve with minor medical treatment. A small percentage of cases will require intensive medical therapy and/or surgery to correct the underlying cause of the colic.

Why does my horse need surgery?

We will recommend surgery for your horse if on examination we have diagnosed a problem with your horse's gastrointestinal tract that can not be corrected medically or they have severe uncontrollable pain that is not responding to medical treatment. Surgery can be required to correct:

- A volvulus – meaning a torsion or twist of the bowel.
- A strangulation of the intestine by a fatty tumour on a cord, known as a lipoma.
- An impaction of the large colon, usually a build-up of feed material or sand.
- A displacement of the bowel.
- A foreign body blocking the small or large colon eg. enterolith.
- Other



The decision to do colic surgery

Here are some points to consider when making this difficult decision:

Diagnosis & Prognosis: Some types of colic have an excellent prognosis, whereas others will be much more guarded. The veterinarians will try to ascertain the likely cause of the colic, but it is important to note that colic surgery is essentially an exploratory laparotomy and owners need to be aware that while tests such as ultrasounds etc can give the veterinarians an indication of the likely cause of the colic, it is not definitive and we often do not know the extent of injury to the intestines until we perform the surgery.

Anesthesia & Recovery: Colic surgery requires general anesthesia, where there is always a risk. The risks increase for horses that are very unwell prior to surgery, and there is always the risk of injury during the recovery process.

Cost: The surgery itself will be around \$3,500-\$5,000 depending on if it is performed during working hours or after hours and the difficulty/length of surgery. Then there will be a minimum of one week post operative intensive care and drugs. The average cost of surgery including post operative recovery will vary from around \$6,000 for a simple mid-day surgery with no complications, up to or above \$15,000 if prolonged intensive care and management is required.

Insurance: Is your horse insured? Does the insurance cover colic surgery? If your horse is insured and the insurance covers colic surgery, most policies will insist that you have surgery done, if required, if you intend to make a claim on the policy if the horse does not survive.

Stress: Colic surgery is not for every horse owner. Intense colic cases are stressful events for horse owners, especially if there are post-operative complications.

About the surgery



Once the decision for colic surgery is made, time is a critical factor. The sooner a problem is corrected, the better the prognosis for the horse. It can take up to an hour from when the horse is anaesthetized to when a diagnosis can be made or confirmed. Once the surgeon has made a diagnosis, they may then want to discuss the problem with you. If the problem is not operable or the prognosis is poor, the decision may be made to discontinue the procedure and your horse may be euthanized on the table. You should be prepared to have this discussion.

Once the specific problem is diagnosed, it must be repaired. This may involve repositioning displaced intestine, removing damaged intestine, clearing a blockage of feed, sand, or a foreign object, or any other necessary procedure. Surgical time ranges from 1 ½ to 4+ hours. The horse may then be in the recovery box for 1 to 4+ hours before being returned

to the intensive care stable.

The recovery period



We consider that there are three critical time periods that are encountered following surgery, although problems can develop at any time. The first hour post surgery is critical as the horse must wake from the anaesthesia and get to its feet. It is a risky time for leg fractures, and sometimes the surgery wound can break open. The next few days are the next critical period, during which the intestines need to restart working, signs of infection may develop or laminitis can occur. Depending on the problem encountered in surgery, your horse may be kept on fluids and they will be monitored closely with veterinary supervision at the clinic and via our live-stream web cam. At

HEVC, our standard protocol is to keep all post colic surgery patients in hospital for a minimum of 7 days after surgery. This time may be greater if post operative complications are encountered. As a general rule, colic surgery patients are kept in a stable for 4 weeks post surgery, followed by 4 weeks in a small yard.

Possible complications

The first 72 hours after surgery are the most critical. This is when the intestines are trying to reorganize and repair themselves from the initial cause of the colic and the trauma of surgery. As a result the intestines sometimes stop moving, which is very painful for the horse. This is called a post operative ileus. Horses that develop an ileus often require a tube to be placed through their nose down to their stomach to empty it. Also, if the circulation to the intestines was cut off for too long, the lining of the intestines sometimes reacts by becoming inflamed, or dies, resulting in severe diarrhoea. If the horse had dead bowel removed, the site of reattachment may fail, causing either another blockage or rupture at the site. After surgery the horse's immune system is compromised from stress, and infection is a concern. Laminitis, although rare, may also occur.

After the first 72 hours, other long-term complications can set in. Scar tissue formation, adhesions and intestinal constriction may decrease the motility of the intestines and cause more colic episodes. Persistent diarrhoea from salmonella infections, microflora imbalance or inflammation of the lining of the colon, is a possibility. Horses may become hard keepers and require additional supplements to maintain. Hernias or infections along the incision line on the belly are also possible.

With the improved surgical techniques and experienced surgeons we have today, a great majority of horses get to go home after colic surgery and make a full recovery.