

CANBERRA Equine HOSPITAL

SAND COLIC

The term “colic” simply means abdominal pain and there are many well-known causes in the equine species. One of the best understood one is the sand impaction or enteropathy, quite common in our beautiful beachy Australia.



What are the symptoms?

It is important to know that sand ingestion can create two different types of clinical bowel disease: diarrhea, and impaction. The diarrhea can be intermittent or constantly loose manure. Whereas, an impaction will cause any sign of abdominal discomfort : looking at abdomen, kicking at belly, stretching abdomen, constantly lying down and standing up, not passing any manure, stopping eating, pawing and rolling.

What causes sand colic?

It is well recognized by all veterinarians that underfed horses, horses being fed a diet of insufficient or poor-quality roughage, and horses on closely grazed overstocked pastures are more prone to ingest larger quantities of soil and develop sand colic. Firstly, the sand is very irritant to the intestinal mucosa, which explains the diarrhea. Secondly, by being heavier than normal intestine content, the sand lies in the more dependent parts of intestine, which creates a distension of the bowel when it accumulates in large quantities, and can evolve into an impaction. Another way for the sand to cause an impaction is when fine particles of sand are compacted and create a big sand rock, called enterolith, which cannot go through the narrower parts of the equine intestine. Another effect of the sand in the intestine is that it disrupts the normal peristalsis of the intestine and can create displacements and volvulus.

How can a veterinarian tell if my horse has sand colic?

At first, when dealing with a patient that has colic and/or diarrhea it is important to rule out any other possible cause. Your veterinarian might want more details about the preventive medication and routine

treatments that your horse has received in the last months.

There are a few diagnostic procedures that can help in determining if the patient is suffering from sand ingestion. The most impressive one is the dilution of fecal balls with water in a rectal glove, but it is not the most sensitive one. In fact, this test could be negative and the horse could still have some sand in the intestines, and it doesn't really give any idea on how much sand there is in the bowels. Another useful test is x-raying the dependent part of the abdomen, but it is not always required before starting treatment. It is the most helpful in determining what quantity of sand is lying in the intestine.

In addition, there are many other tests that your veterinarian may choose to process depending on your horse's physical examination.



Rectal glove fecal testing



Dependent abdominal x-ray

How is sand colic treated?

In veterinary literature, the best treatment for intestinal sand is the product psyllium, given orally in any available form (pellets or powdered). It works by binding the sand in the bowel and helping it to be excreted in the manure. Some cases will also require paraffin oil as a laxative and pain relief may be necessary depending on the veterinary assessment of your horse's pain.

Can I prevent my horse from eating sand?

Definitely. Prevention is the best way to reduce the risk of sand colic. There are many ways to prevent sand consumption. Feeding on rubber covered ground away from sandy areas in the paddock, in rubber buckets or on elevated feeders. Also, always make sure your horse receives all the nutrients he needs through a well balanced feeding diet, so he is less inclined to nibble at the dirt.



Rubber bucket feeding



Haynet feeding

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