

## COLIC IN DONKEYS

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**THE DONKEY  
SANCTUARY**

## PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE, SO MAKE SURE YOU KNOW THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF COLIC

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### WHAT IS COLIC?

Colic is a symptom rather than a disease, and defined as abdominal pain.

The following kinds of colic (not an exhaustive list) are sometimes seen:

- Impactions or blockages with partially digested food.
- Muscle cramps (spasmodic colic).
- Gas colic (flatulent colic).
- Tumours in the abdomen, particularly in older donkeys.
- Obstructions with “foreign bodies” such as plastic bags.
- Twisted guts (torsion).
- Stomach ulcers.
- Worms: tapeworms or roundworms.
- Pancreatitis. A very serious inflammation of the pancreas.

**IF YOU SUSPECT THAT  
YOUR DONKEY IS  
UNWELL, CALL YOUR  
VET IMMEDIATELY!**

### SIGNS THAT A DONKEY HAS COLIC

The donkey with colic may only become dull and unwilling to eat. Research at The Donkey Sanctuary suggests that a significant percentage of donkeys reported to its Veterinary Department as being just “dull” are diagnosed with colic. The stoic nature of the donkey is such that signs of colic are usually less dramatic than those seen in a horse, such as rolling, sweating, pawing the ground. Just because the signs can be less dramatic it does not mean the donkey is feeling pain any the less.

#### **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 (rare in donkeys, if seen indicates very serious problem).
- Fast breathing. raised heart rate
- Excessive sweating.
- Colour of gums or inside eyelid – brick red colour is a poor sign.
- Lack of or a reduction in the normal quantity of droppings.

Observe your donkey(s) daily, looking for any changes in behaviour. Know what normal dung looks like. 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 droppings could be indicative of colic particularly if other symptoms appear. Check the donkey’s breathing pattern so you will be able to spot any change. See TPR section of The Donkey Care Guide to learn about normal respiratory rates.

## TREATMENT FOR COLIC

If you see these signs or suspect that your donkey is unwell, call your vet immediately! Give the vet any information that you have observed. Monitor the donkey's condition and behaviour while you are waiting. It will be really helpful if you can tell the vet if the donkey produces any dung and whether it looks normal.

**IF YOU SUSPECT THAT YOUR DONKEY IS UNWELL, CALL YOUR VET IMMEDIATELY!**

Do not attempt to treat the donkey yourself or give it a feed or any drugs. Treatment depends on the cause diagnosed by the vet. Your vet will probably carry out the following:

- 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.
- Perform a rectal examination. (a painless and vital procedure)

Depending on the findings your vet may introduce fluids into your donkey's stomach via a tube that is inserted up one nostril. It may be necessary to put the donkey onto a 'drip' (fluid introduction via the large vein in the neck). Pain killers will probably be prescribed and other drugs such as antibiotics may be indicated. Hospitalisation may be indicated and some cases may require surgery (are you insured for veterinary fees?). Euthanasia may also be the kindest option in serious cases.

## CAUSES AND PREVENTION OF COLIC

Colic is so dangerous 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.

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There are many causes, and many ways to greatly reduce the risk of colic. Some causes, such as tumours, may be unavoidable and their likelihood increases with age. Some abdominal pain is inevitable, e.g. during foaling. However, any suspicion of colic requires immediate veterinary attention.

Possible causes of colic	Management for prevention of Colic
Feed: sudden changes to diet, poor quality feed, too much grass, feeding cereals	Follow good feeding practices Make any dietary changes gradually over at least a week, ideally 2-4 weeks. Feed good quality forage and donkey specific proprietary feeds. Avoid mouldy feed. Always soak sugar beet to the manufacturer's recommendations. Ensure regular feeding: little and often especially if the animal is on additional feed. Avoid access to too much rich spring grass which can lead to problems with laminitis and colic.

	Avoid access to grain and other rich feed. Rich feeds, particularly those that are high in starch and sugar, can cause laminitis and colic.
Inadequate/dirty water supply	<p>Check troughs at least daily. Self-fill drinkers can become blocked, water supply can fail.</p> <p>Clean any contaminated water containers as donkeys won't drink dirty water.</p> <p>Check for freezing. Check water is not frozen or too cold. Many donkeys won't drink very cold water – take the chill off the water in cold weather.</p> <p>Consider offering several sources of water</p>
Eating non-food items such as plastic bags, rope, bedding	<p>Ensure your donkey cannot access such material.</p> <p>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 wood shavings. Cardboard or paper bedding is not recommended for donkeys.</p>
Ingestion of poisonous plants	<p>Know your poisonous plants and trees!</p> <p>Check pasture and boundary fences and hedgerows frequently and remove them or fence off the problem area.</p> <p>Fence off trees during fruiting to prevent gorging.</p>
Sandy soil	Avoid grazing on sandy soil pasture if possible
Dental disease – failure to chew food adequately resulting in a blockage of the gut	<p>Ensure your donkey's teeth are checked at least annually by a qualified Equine Dental Technician or your veterinary surgeon</p> <p>Dental disease is more common in older donkeys. Suspect teeth problems if donkeys are "quidding" (dropping part chewed feed) or drooling saliva.</p>
Worms – migrating worm larvae or large numbers of worms causing an obstruction	<p>Ensure regular faecal worm egg counts (FWECs) are carried out to determine if your donkey requires treating for worms. Consult your vet for advice.</p> <p>Picking up manure from the paddock a minimum of twice per week.</p>
Stomach ulcers	Reduce stress and ensure you 'trickle feed' your donkey

## THE DONKEY SANCTUARY

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The Donkey Sanctuary was founded by Dr Elisabeth Svendsen MBE in 1969.

The Donkey Sanctuary (registered charity number 264818) and its sole corporate trustee, The Donkey Sanctuary Trustee Limited (Company number 07328588) both have their registered office at Slade House Farm, Sidmouth, EX10 0NU.

Incorporating: The Elisabeth Svendsen Trust for Children and Donkeys (EST); The International Donkey Protection Trust (IDPT).

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