



Types of colic

Colic is responsible for 1 in 3 emergency equine veterinary call-outs and is a major cause of death or euthanasia in horses.

In this article we talk about the different types of colic that can occur. More information on this topic is available on The [British Horse Society's](https://www.britisheveterinaryassociation.org.uk/education-and-research/colic) website.

Types of colic

The word 'colic' simply means 'pain in the abdomen (belly)'. So although we tend to think of colic as a single condition, it is actually just a sign that something is wrong in the horse's abdomen – most probably in its digestive tract.

Almost every part of the horse's digestive tract can be affected by colic and a number of different things can go wrong with each part of the system. This means that there are numerous different types of colic. The most common types that can affect the stomach, small intestine, caecum and/or large colon are shown in Figure 1.

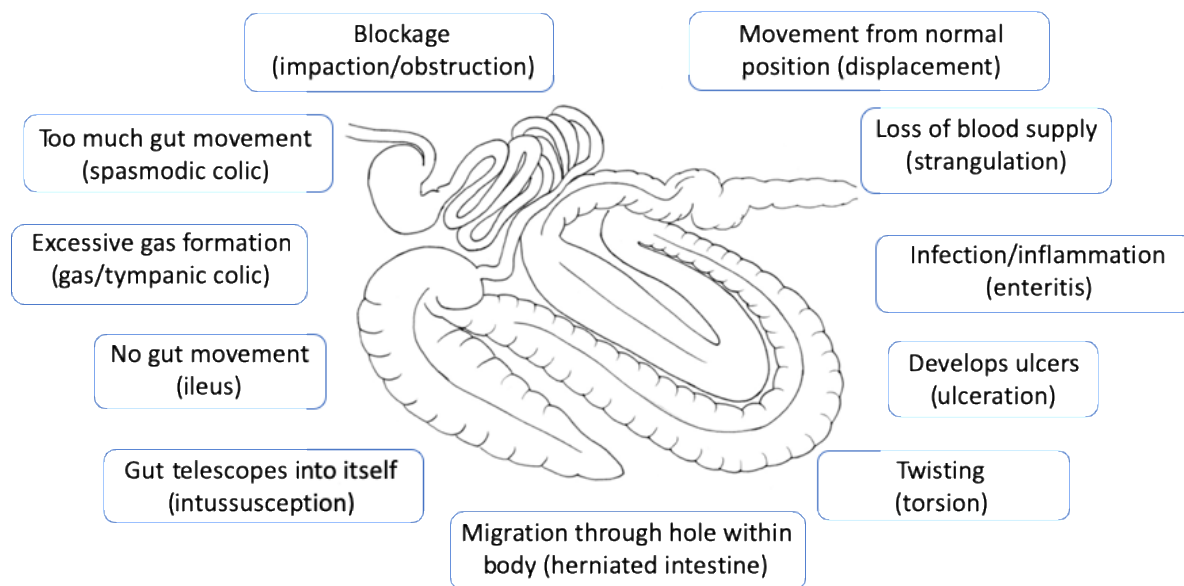


Figure 1. Problems with the digestive system that can cause colic

A survey carried out by the University of Nottingham showed that the cause of colic was not known in approximately 25% of cases. This is because many types of colic have similar signs. However, because approximately 80% of horses get better with veterinary treatment at the yard, it is not usually a problem if the exact cause is unknown.

Of the colic cases in this survey in which a diagnosis was made, the vets diagnosed spasmodic colic (in which there is excessive movement/spasm of the gut) in 25% of cases, non-surgical problems of the large colon in 15% and gas colic in 3%. A further 18% were caused by problems that required surgery or resulted in euthanasia. These included cases involving strangulation, in which part of digestive tract has lost its blood supply.

Severity of colic

Some types of colic are almost always fairly mild (e.g., spasmodic colic), some can be mild or serious depending on severity and the part of the digestive system affected (e.g., impaction), and some are always extremely serious (e.g., those involving strangulation, in which part of the intestine has lost its blood supply). Figure 2 shows how the likely outcome differs depending on the type of colic.

For example, almost all cases of spasmodic colic have a very good prognosis (chance of recovery) and can be managed on the yard, whereas any case that involves strangulation requires urgent referral and surgery if the horse is to survive. Other articles in this series cover the topics of critical colic and referral in greater detail ('Critical colic cases' and 'Colic: The decision to refer').

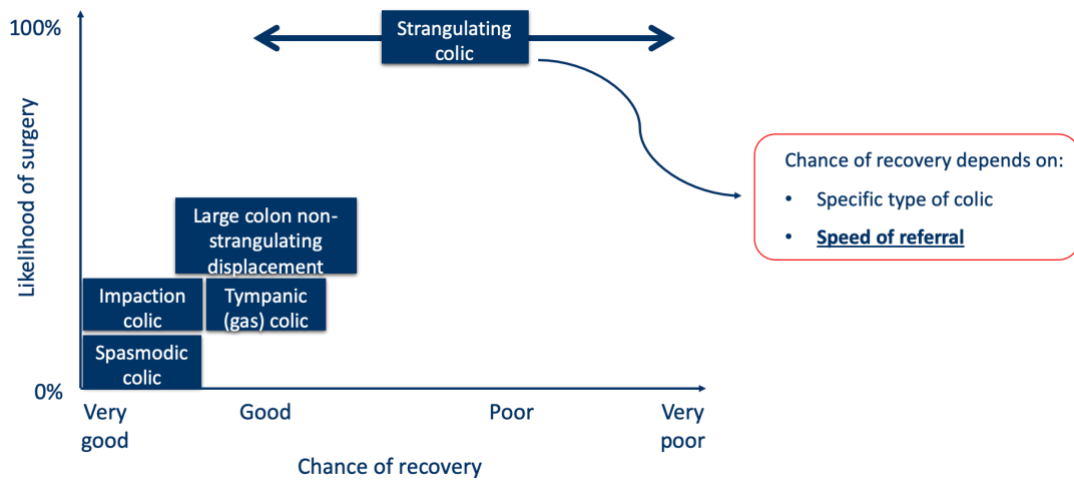


Figure 2. Prognosis and likelihood of needing surgery by type of colic

For cases that need referral for specialist care, any delay in getting the horse to an equine hospital can quite literally make the difference between life and death. For this reason, it is extremely important that you always call your vet at the first signs of colic. It may be difficult to know how serious a case of colic is when signs first appear but your vet is best placed to be able to determine the potential severity, and to know whether surgery is likely to be necessary.