Some Thoughts on Preventing Colic in Horses

All of us who own horses are afraid of colic. We all know horses that have been affected, had surgery, or even died of colic. Colic is a term used by veterinarians and horse owners to describe a wide variety of illnesses in the horse with the common feature of abdominal pain. Some of those illnesses are not preventable. An example would be a lipoma (fatty tumor) on a long stalk that wraps itself around a piece of intestine. Many forms of colic are preventable with some fairly simple management practices and that is what we want to talk about today.

1. **Use first cutting grass hay as the basis of most equine diets. Avoid rich, high carbohydrate feeds unless the horse requires additional nutrition to do its’ job.**
   This and adequate deworming are the most important things we can do to prevent colic. Why? First we need to think about how the horse was designed. These marvelous athletes have a digestive system that is specifically designed to utilize long-stem forage. Cows have a fermentation chamber (the rumen) at the front of the digestive system. This works perfectly to handle rich feeds such as grains and third cutting alfalfa hay. Horses’ fermentation chamber is at the back of the digestive system. The front of the horse digestive system is designed for high fiber, low carbohydrate feeds and can be overwhelmed by the high carbohydrate loads of grains and rich hay. Studies have shown that the wild horses spend an average of 16 hours per day eating. A horse may be able to consume all of the nutrients it needs for a day in an hour or two when eating rich diets such as alfalfa and grains. This puts a huge burden on the system and may result in metabolic imbalances.

2. **Feed at least 2 times each day.**
   Why? The cow rumen also serves as a huge storage vat. Cows eat a big meal and spend the next few hours digesting it. Horses have small stomachs and need to eat their feed over a much longer period to keep a continuous flow of food material moving through the system. This also gives the horse something to do reducing boredom and the resulting unwanted behaviors such as wood chewing.

3. **Let the horse get plenty of exercise.**
   This may not directly decrease colic but it does decrease boredom which may decrease cribbing and stress resulting in possible ulcers. Both of these have been thought to contribute to colic.

4. **Control internal parasites.**
   Worms cause colic by damage to the intestines or sometimes by obstructing the intestines. Most of us have a schedule for deworming our horses and this has decreased the incidence of worm-induced colic. But now we are seeing more drug-resistant parasites. A new approach called Targeted Deworming uses fecal exams to decrease the amount of medicine used and find the best deworming treatments for your individual horses.

5. **Have water available at all times.**
   In the summer horses have to have water to avoid dehydration. In the winter the water may freeze and be unavailable. An older study showed that horses seem to prefer cold water but will drink more volume of water if it is warmed. Maybe warm water does not satisfy them as much but it sure helps keep the feed material soft and prevent impaction colics in the winter.

6. **Use feeders for hay.**
   Feeders will decrease hay wastage by the horse and will decrease intake of sand with the hay. Sand settles out in the intestine and results in obstruction. The best feeders have the horses eating with their heads down. They do not get as much debris in their lungs this way and seem to prefer this simulated grazing position. You have probably all seen horses pull hay out of elevated feeders and eat it on the ground.

7. **Check the teeth.**
   It is uncommon for bad teeth to result in colic. But if it is painful for the horse to chew he may not begin the digestive processes effectively.