

## **Sand Colic: How to Recognize, Treat, and Prevent this Common Problem**

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### **What Is Sand Colic?**

Colic in the horse is defined as anything that causes abdominal pain or alters the normal function of the GI tract. Sand colic is nothing more than abdominal pain caused by the ingestion and accumulation of sand. Many horses eat sand accidentally when they graze grasses from a sandy pasture or when they eat hay from the ground. Some horses however, especially foals, will eat sand intentionally. This behavior may be associated with a mineral imbalance or deficiency. Many horses that eat sand are able to clear it from their GI tracts, but some accumulate sand and develop impactions and/or gastrointestinal irritation.

Clinical signs of sand colic include diarrhea, and other signs associated with any type of colic, including rolling, pawing, looking at the flanks, not eating, lethargy, etc.

### **How Is Sand Colic Diagnosed?**

If your horse is colicking or has diarrhea, or if he or she lives in a sandy environment, it is a good idea to have your veterinarian check your horse for sand. This can be accomplished in the field, by listening to the underside of a horse's abdomen with a stethoscope. When there is sand accumulation within the colon, it is possible to hear sounds like waves breaking on the seashore. Another simple way your vet looks for sand in the field is to collect a fecal sample, and add water to the sample. Any sand in the feces will sink to the bottom and be easily recognized.

The most sensitive way to detect sand, however, is to take radiographs (x-rays) of your horse's abdomen. Sand is composed of minerals, so it appears bright in radiographs, like bone. We can measure the depth of sand accumulation within the colon on the radiographs, and use that measurement to estimate the total quantity therein. It is not uncommon for up to 50 lbs. of sand to accumulate in the colon.

### **How Is Sand Colic Prevented?**

It can be difficult to prevent sand ingestion in areas with loose, sandy soil, such as is found in Arizona. Sand colic is best prevented by feeding your horse from a sand-free manger or elevated feeder.

In addition, psyllium can be added to your horse's diet as a supplement. Psyllium is a laxative that attracts water and forms a gel within the GI tract. This gel acts to agglutinate and entrap the sand, and ease its passage in the feces. Dry, pelleted psyllium can be fed at a dose of 1-2 cups per horse per day, for one week out of every month, for the prevention of sand colic.

**How Is Sand Colic Treated?**

Impactions due to sand are treated medically with psyllium, at a higher dose than is used for prevention. In addition, pain medications like banamine can be used, as well as other types of laxatives and cathartics, oral fluids, and/or IV fluids. In the most severe cases, surgery may be necessary to relieve the impaction and remove the sand.

Sand colic is usually a manageable disease when detected early. Please do not hesitate to contact your vet if you have any questions, or if you suspect sand colic in your horse.