

## Telephone triage and advice for owners of horses with colic

Recognising horses with signs of colic is not always easy, as they may present with a range of different signs and severity. The many different conditions that can cause colic also range in seriousness and how rapidly they need to be seen and treated. Some cases are critical and need early veterinary investigation and treatment to ensure a positive outcome. Successful treatment of 'critical' cases can therefore depend on early recognition by the owner and prompt veterinary attention. Triage is a process of prioritising how urgent cases may be – it is frequently used in human medicine, and the triage process starts from the initial phone call by the owner / patient seeking advice.

The information in this pack is designed for veterinary client care teams that may be dealing with the first contact from a horse owner, and deciding whether the horse has colic and what actions need to be taken. It covers the following areas:

- Does the horse have colic?
- Is the case likely to be urgent / critical?
- What should the owner be doing whilst waiting for vet to arrive?

This pack is for guidance only – each practice will have their own policy for prioritising and triaging emergency cases – the information in this leaflet is to give guidance about useful questions to ask and to provide accessible resources to help inform decisions. It may be useful for practices to develop as part of their Practice Standards Scheme (Module 3: Client Experience; Protocol for Recognising and Dealing with Requests for Emergency Treatment).

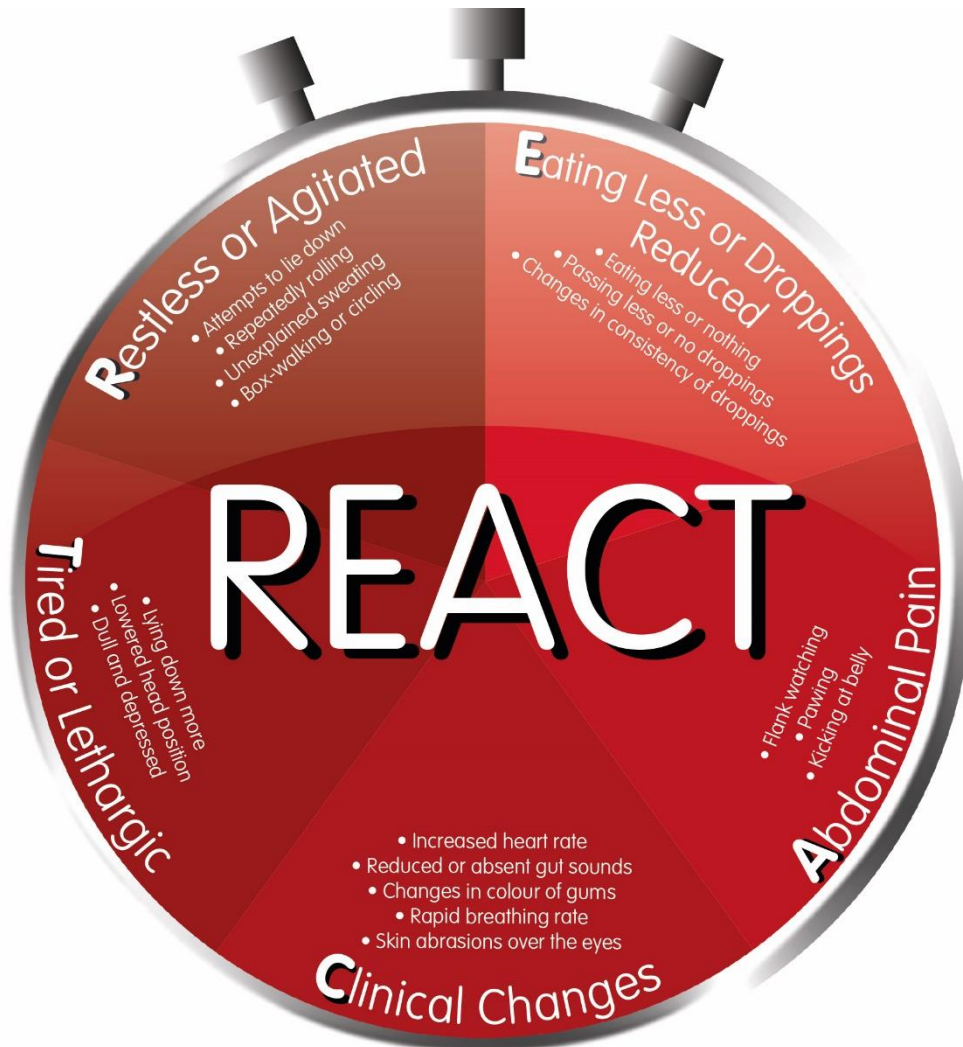
The pack consists of a template for recording information when a client first calls in, a triage decision-making flow chart, and information sheets giving further details around the key questions and advice for horse owners. This information will also be freely available as templates at [www.react.vet](http://www.react.vet) for practices to download and adapt to a format of their choice.

Information for horse owners on types of colic, signs of colic, what to do while waiting for the vet to arrive, what the vet will do, and what referral will involve are all available free online through a dedicated webpage on The British Horse Society website: [www.bhs.org.uk/colic](http://www.bhs.org.uk/colic). Hard copies of the REACT packs containing this information can be obtained by contacting the BHS welfare team.

*The materials in this pack are part of a campaign to provide materials to aid in the early recognition and diagnosis of colic in the horse. They are based on reviews of current evidence, recent studies and surveys of horse owners and vets. They are freely available online to view, share, print or download from the website [www.react.vet](http://www.react.vet). Information for horse owners is freely available on a dedicated webpage on The British Horse Society website [www.bhs.org.uk/colic](http://www.bhs.org.uk/colic) to view, share, print or download. The research behind this campaign has been generated by The School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, University of Nottingham, and supported by funding from the University of Nottingham, Petplan Charitable Trust and World Horse Welfare.*

## Does the horse have colic?

The classic textbook signs of colic (pawing the ground, kicking the belly and rolling) are not shown by all horses with colic. The most common signs are often more subtle, and can be associated with colic and with other problems in the horse. The REACT poster shows the most common and important signs of colic in the horse (ranked by owners of horses who had colic and vets).



The most common behavioural signs that an owner may notice are:

- Eating less or nothing
- Reduced or no droppings
- Restlessness / Attempts to lie down
- Tired / lethargic / reluctant to move / lying down more

Other signs include: changes in temperament / behaviour, flank watching, rolling, pawing the ground, lowered head position, sweating, lip curling (flehen), wide-based stance/posture, straining to urinate, yawning, teeth-grinding and increased frequency or severity of stereotypies such as crib-biting and box-walking. Early / mild cases and some conditions, such as intestinal impactions, can show mild or subtle signs which are more difficult for the owner to recognise.

The attached form can be completed to help with some of the key information to put together when the owner first phones in, which can then be linked into the vet's visit and examination. These can be divided into three sections:

### 1. Signs of colic

These questions will help the vet determine the onset, duration and nature of the colic episode.

- When did signs first start / when was horse last seen behaving normally?
- What signs is the horse showing?
- Have these signs changed / progressed over time?

If the owner is not sure whether their horse has colic, then useful questions to ask include:

- Has the horse been eating normally? (inappetance is significant)
- Is it passing droppings normally? (reduced droppings is significant)
- Is it more restless or agitated than normal? (both are significant)
- Is it lying down more or reluctant to move? (both are significant)

### 2. Previous history

These questions can help the vet determine which types of colic are more likely to be occurring.

- How old is the horse?
- Has it had colic previously?
- Have there been any recent changes in the horse's routine or management? (and if so, what were the changes)

### 3. Owners' emergency plans and decision making

A small number of cases will be critical, and in these cases owners may have to be difficult decisions as quickly as possible. The earlier they consider and plan these decisions, the more prepared they will be to react quickly if needed. These questions can help start this process, and owners can be directed to the free BHS resources for further guidance.

- Do the owners have an emergency plan in place, and have they considered what further treatment they would want in their horse?
- If further treatment / referral is needed, is the horse insured, and is the owner aware what would and would not be covered?

*It is the responsibility of a qualified vet to provide a possible diagnosis of colic.  
Further information is available in The British Horse Society leaflets 'What is Colic' and 'Recognising the signs of Colic' and 'Emergency Decision Making'. [www.bhs.org.uk/colic](http://www.bhs.org.uk/colic)  
'Emergency Decision Making' has details on what may and may not be covered by an insurance policy, and what owners need to plan for if their horse requires transport to a hospital.*

## Is the case likely to be urgent / critical?

Urgent / critical cases are those that require urgent medical or surgical treatment or euthanasia, and delays in treatment can affect welfare and outcome. The critical signs of colic can vary between horses; this information provides guidance on the most common signs to help identify and triage critical cases, but will not always distinguish every case.

Signs of severe pain in critical cases include:

- Skin abrasions over the eyes (from rolling / thrashing around)
- Rolling continuously
- Throwing themselves to the ground
- Dull and unresponsive
- Sweating and rapid breathing



It is important to note that critical cases can also present as very dull and unresponsive, and these horses may be as sick / critical as those which are throwing themselves around. Some critical conditions can also show rapid and progressive abdominal distension (swollen belly). Any of these signs indicate the case may be critical and need the most urgent veterinary attention.

Useful questions to help identify cases which may be critical include:

- **How severe are the signs of pain?** (more severe pain = more likely to be critical)
- **Are the signs of pain intermittent or continuous?** (continuous pain = more likely to be critical)
- **Does the horse have any injuries / abrasions from rolling / going down?** (self-inflicted injuries = more likely to be critical)
- **Is the horse alert and responsive or dull and non-responsive?** (dull and non-responsive = more likely to be critical)
- **Is the horse sweating or breathing rapidly** (unexplained sweating and rapid breathing = more likely to be critical)

*The decision of whether a case is critical or not is the responsibility of a qualified vet. The signs described are those that were significantly associated with critical outcomes in two studies, or those ranked by vets as being most common/important indicators of a critical condition. Further information on signs of critical cases is available at*

<http://www.react.vet/critical.html>

## What should the owner be doing whilst waiting for vet to arrive?

Horses with severe colic can be difficult to handle and there is a risk of injury to the owner and handler. The owner is often distressed, and may need some advice on what they should be doing whilst waiting for the vet to arrive. There are a number of key points that can be helpful to advise them on:

- Lying down / rolling does not make colic worse or cause a twisted gut. The priority should be the owner and horse's safety, rather than trying to keep the horse standing up.
- The owner should consider wearing protective clothing, including a hard hat, sensible footwear and gloves. Horses that are showing signs of pain often behave differently and are not as aware of the people around them.
- If the horse is trying to go down, then it should be placed in a well bedded stable, with any loose buckets or loose objects removed first.
- If a stable is not available, the horse can be placed in an arena on a long lunge line, with the owner / handler standing a safe distance away, and wearing a hard hat and gloves for safety.
- The horse should not be given any food, and any remaining food should be removed.
- If the horse is showing milder signs of pain, the horse can be gently walked for 15-20 minutes, but they should not trot or canter the horse, or walk it for longer until it has been examined by a vet and the vet has made their recommendation.

The majority of cases are not critical and resolve following a single veterinary visit and treatment. For those cases that are critical, rapid decision-making is needed by both owners and vets, and helping owners start this decision-making process as early as possible can be very helpful. Delays in referral due not having transport plans in place, or not having made a decision on whether to pursue further treatment are not uncommon. Helping the owner start this decision-making process as early as possible can ensure they have time to be prepared and make the correct decisions.

- The owner should consider what they wish to do if the horse requires further treatment - if they are insured, they should check what their insurance policy does and does not cover.
- If the owner would consider further treatment at a referral hospital, if it is needed, they should ensure that they have a plan in place for:
  - transporting the horse
  - covering any care and commitments for children / other animals / work so the horse can be transported without delay
  - ensuring they have all the horse's relevant paperwork (passports and insurance documents)
  - a method of paying any referral fees (often required at point of admission)
- The owner should consider if they want to ask a friend to travel with them

*Detailed information is available on The British Horse Society leaflet 'Emergency Decision Making', 'Waiting for the Vet to Arrive' and 'What happens at Referral'. Information on procedures that the vet may do is described in three leaflets: 'What will my vet do if my horse has colic?', 'Rectal examination' and 'Nasogastric intubation'. [www.bhs.org.uk/colic](http://www.bhs.org.uk/colic)*

## Approaching the difficult questions

Early recognition and successful outcome for critical cases relies on rapid decision-making on the part of both the owner and the vet. In a recent study, 100% of vets and 97% of owners involved felt an emergency plan should be in place to help urgent decision-making. This plan should cover essential aspects such as insurance details and whether the owner has access to transportation.

Some of the decisions in critical cases can be challenging and emotional for the client. The earlier they start considering these, the more time they have to think through the different options, and be ready to make the right decision for their personal situation when the vet examines the horse and discusses options. Starting this process during the initial conversation can assist the vet and owner to act quickly if rapid and urgent action is needed.

Although this sounds simple enough, approaching the more difficult questions, such as discussing insurance or referral, before the vet has examined the horse can be problematic and must be handled with care to avoid causing the owner to worry unnecessarily. The majority of colic cases will resolve with a single medical treatment, but up to 1 in 5 may need repeated treatments, intensive treatment or referral and a small proportion may require euthanasia. Although these cases are a minority, helping the owner to consider an emergency plan will make decision-making easier if this situation arises.

The phrasing of these questions should be done in such a way which makes the owner feel they are being included in the management of their horse and given options, rather than being questioned. The following table contains example phrases which could be used when approaching the more challenging subjects, after which are some examples of how these phrases can be incorporated into a conversation in order to gather as much key information as possible, as well as prompting the owner to consider these aspects before their horse is seen.

Aim of phrase	Examples
<b><i>Encouraging contribution</i></b>	'Can you explain a little more about.....' 'When did this start.....' 'What do you mean by.....' 'Tell me more.....'
<b><i>Gathering information</i></b>	'Would you mind if I asked you a few more questions.....?' 'Can I ask a few more specific questions....?'
<b><i>Gathering ideas</i></b>	'What thoughts have you had in regards to.....' 'I was just wondering, have you had any ideas yourself about.....'
<b><i>Acknowledging emotions</i></b>	'I understand this is a difficult situation.....' 'This must be very hard for you.....'
<b><i>Establishing concerns</i></b>	'Is there anything you'd like to discuss with me.....' 'Is there anything in particular you're worried about.....'
<b><i>Exploring understanding</i></b>	'You mentioned.....what do you mean by that?' 'Please correct me if I'm wrong but did you say.....'
<b><i>Encouraging involvement</i></b>	'What thoughts have you had about.....' 'There are a few options.....which would you prefer?' 'What ideas have you had about.....' 'Have you already thought about.....'

## Examples of how key phrases could be used during an initial conversation with an owner:

- 'Tell me more about (horse's name).....' – *this could be an opportunity to indirectly ask about insurance*
- 'Can I just to confirm we have all of (horse's name) details correct..... '
- 'The majority of colic cases can be resolved after the vets initial visit, however, in some cases further treatment or referral may be required, is this something you'd consider for (horse's name)?'
- 'You mentioned referral would be an option for (horse's name) if required, is that right? .....ok..... do you have access to your own transport or would you like me to provide you with some details of local transporters now in case you need them?'
- 'You mentioned you'd consider having (horse's name) sent for referral if required, is that right? ..... ok..... is (horse's name) insured or would you like me to discuss possible costs with you now so you can have a think whilst you are waiting for the vet? '
- 'Would you mind if I asked a few more questions to clarify details for the vet visiting you?'
- 'Although the majority of colic cases can be resolved after the first treatment, do you have any questions you'd like to ask me regarding what would be involved if (horse's name) requires further treatment?' – *the owner may state their feelings on referral and can be an opportunity to ask about transport options*
- 'Just to make sure the vet has all the information they need, could I ask a few more specific questions?'
- 'I can imagine this is a worrying time for you, but you're doing really well. What is (horse's name) doing at the moment? ..... Ok..... and where is he being kept right now? ....I see.... there are a few things that you can do whilst waiting for the vet that can help (horse's name), would you like me to talk you through them?'
- 'I understand this must be a very difficult time for you..... is there anything that is particularly worrying you?' – *owner may open up about potential referral or monetary concerns*
- 'The vet will be able to discuss all available treatment options with you once they have examined (horse's name), whilst you are waiting for them to arrive have you thought about..... ' – *referral and transport options could be approached*
- 'I know this must be really hard for you right now, but do you have any thoughts on what treatment options you'd like the vet to discuss with you when they arrive?' – *gives the owner opportunity to state if referral is an option*

Client care teams have an important role within the practice and are the link between owners and other veterinary teams such as the vets and nurses. As the first point of contact questions such as ‘what do you think is wrong with my horse?’ can often be asked. The provision of a possible diagnosis is the responsibility of a qualified vet, but phrasing can also be used to reassure the owner and encourage them to book an appointment so that their horse can be examined.

For example, if an owner asks your opinion on what may be wrong with their horse or suggests a diagnosis of their own, you could advise the owner that:

- ‘It is difficult to tell what may be wrong with (horse name) without a full examination by one of our vets, however, from the information you have given me I’d advise we arrange for one of our vets to take a look at (horse name)’.

Although the initial conversation with a worried owner can be difficult, careful questioning and reassurance by veterinary client care team members can initiate the decision-making process much earlier in the management of colic cases and enable the owner to consider all of their options before the vet arrives.

Each owner should be treated as an individual and as such the conversation should be tailored to meet their needs and level of understanding. The examples and phrases included within this pack are suggestions only and may not be appropriate in all situations. By asking questions that encourage an owner’s contribution to the conversation and acknowledging their concerns, the key information can be gathered and the owner can prepare for the vet’s arrival, potentially avoiding delays in treatment.

Owners can be directed to the British Horse Society website ([www.bhs.org.uk/colic](http://www.bhs.org.uk/colic)) for more detailed information in regards to making emergency decisions, what they can do whilst waiting for the vet and what is involved in the referral process.





History		
<b>Has the horse suffered from colic before?</b>		Yes      No
If 'Yes', when was the last episode -		
<b>When did signs first start and when was the horse last seen showing normal behaviour?</b>		
<b>What are the main signs being shown by the horse? (circle)</b>  Restless or Agitated i.e. rolling, sweating,  Eating less or Droppings reduced  Abdominal Pain i.e. pawing, flank watching, kicking belly  Clinical changes i.e. rapid breathing  Tired or Lethargic  Other –	<b>Is the horse showing any of the following signs? (circle)</b>  Severe, unrelenting pain  Self-trauma i.e. abrasions/injuries above eyes or on hip area  Dull, depressed and non-responsive  Unexplained sweating  Unexplained rapid breathing	
<b>Are the signs getting worse?</b>		Yes      No
<b>Is the horse willing to get up and stand?</b>		Yes      No
<b>Has there been a recent change in management?</b>		Yes      No
If 'Yes', what has changed and when did this occur –		
<b>Is the owner happy for the horse to be referred if required?</b>		Yes      No
<i>Direct to resources on emergency decision-making if required</i> <a href="http://www.bhs.org.uk/colic">www.bhs.org.uk/colic</a>		
<b>Does the owner have access to equine transport if required?</b>		Yes      No
If no, have details of equine transporters been offered?		Yes      No