

Chronic Diarrhoea

in the adult horse

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Diarrhoea is always an abnormal finding in the horse and an indication of a problem that could get much worse.

While a sudden and copious onset should be treated as an emergency, in this article Dr Sarah Van Dyk from WestVETS Animal Hospitals and Equine Reproduction Centre, discusses chronic, persistent, low grade diarrhoea in the adult horse, the type that is often described as: "always a bit loose".

Chronic persistent low grade diarrhoea in adult horses refers to those cases that are often described as "his manure has always been a bit loose" and by definition diarrhoea persists for 2-3 weeks or longer. The faeces is generally more loose than normal, and is more similar to cow pat consistency rather than watery.

Unfortunately there isn't always a straight forward answer to the cause of chronic diarrhoea. They are often very frustrating cases which require diagnostics and treatment trials.

In these chronic cases, the horse can compensate for the fluid lost through the faeces and generally doesn't pass faeces more frequently than usual. You may also notice weight loss, a dull rough coat and lethargy but generally no colic symptoms and a normal temperature.

Call the vet!

Diarrhoea appearing suddenly that is particularly watery or copious can be very dangerous as there is a high risk of dehydration, endotoxaemia and even death in some cases. The horse may be febrile, showing signs of colic or straining.

These acute cases should be treated as emergencies and a veterinarian contacted immediately.

Causes of chronic diarrhoea

The causes of chronic diarrhoea are many, and this is by no means an exhaustive list:

- Dietary change – this should not cause diarrhoea for longer than 1 week
- Infectious - Chronic salmonellosis, Lawsonia (mostly young horses and usually with other clinical signs)
- Parasitism – Strongyles such as cyathostomes or Strongylus vulgaris infestation
- Drugs – Antibiotic or non steroidal anti-inflammatories such as phenylbutazone
- Sand induced colitis
- Inflammatory bowel disease or malabsorptive disorders (such as granulomatous enteritis)
- Chronic peritonitis, abdominal abscessation
- Neoplasia – Lymphosarcoma, squamous cell carcinoma
- Non gastrointestinal causes – Chronic liver disease, congestive heart failure, renal disease (other clinical signs are evident)
- Idiopathic chronic diarrhoea, which means there is no specific diagnosis. Many chronic diarrhoeas fall into this category



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In approximately 65% of diarrhoea cases, an underlying cause is never identified.

Endoscopic examination of the stomach, rectum and descending colon can be done to visualise the inside of these parts of the gastrointestinal tract for abnormalities and take biopsies. Biopsies are useful to look for inflammatory, infiltrative disease or neoplasia of the gastrointestinal tract. Taking a biopsy sample of the rectum does not require a general anaesthetic however in some cases it may be necessary to do an exploratory laparotomy to take intestinal and liver biopsies which requires a general anaesthetic.

Other diagnostic aids include absorption tests and response to therapy.

Treatment

Treatment really depends on the outcome of diagnostic tests, however in many cases finding the cause for the diarrhoea is not possible and different treatments can be trialled until there is a positive response. It is best to consult your veterinarian before commencing treatment.

For suspected strongylosis, de-wormers containing ivermectin, moxidectin or fenbendazole are most effective; consult your veterinarian for an appropriate treatment regime.

Management of nutrition is important. In some cases a change of diet to grass hay is seen to be of some help. For sand colitis cases, psyllium supplementation in feed helps move the sand through. There are a number of herbal remedies designed for aiding in the treatment of diarrhoea which may be helpful.

Immunosuppressive drugs such as corticosteroids are sometimes implemented in cases of inflammatory bowel disease or neoplasia. Antibiotics are seldom helpful in chronic cases of diarrhoea.

Another possible treatment which is uncommonly used due to the lack of availability and variable response is administration of caecal contents from a dead horse to restore microbial balance.

Although there are many diagnostics and possible treatments available, these cases tend to be very frustrating for you as a horse owner and before you start attempting to find the cause for your horse's chronic diarrhoea, you should be prepared for the fact that a particular cause may not be found.

Diagnostics

Cases of persistent diarrhoea can be a diagnostic challenge. History taking is very important to give your vet all the information possible. This may include the age of the horse, history of parasite control, whether other horses on the property are affected, what the pasture looks like and duration of clinical signs.

A good start is to take a blood test to look for signs of infection, deficiencies, protein levels and organ function. Evaluation of a faecal sample is very important and can give a lot of information. Your vet may examine the faeces under a microscope and send the sample to a laboratory for culture or PCR. Sand may be detected in a faecal sample by filling a glove with manure and water and waiting for it to settle.

Following this, further diagnostic workup may include an abdominal ultrasound to examine the gastrointestinal tract. Samples of peritoneal fluid may be taken at the same time for analysis.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sarah Van Dyk BVSc (Hons) - Mixed Animal Veterinarian. Sarah worked at WestVETS as an afterhours nurse in her last year of studies at UQ. Upon graduation in 2009, Sarah worked in Armidale, New South Wales in mixed practice for some time before re-joining the team at WestVETS as a mixed animal veterinarian. Her special interests are small animal surgery, farm animal medicine and surgery, and equine medicine and reproduction. She also enjoys being attending veterinarian at endurance rides and other equestrian events. In her spare time, she enjoys snowsports, art, horseriding and long distance running.

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