

ACUTE DIARRHEA

General Information

Acute (of sudden onset) diarrhea can be minimal, occurring as loose stools on only 1 or 2 occasions, with no other abnormalities, or diarrhea may be severe, with marked changes in the bowel lining and life-threatening fluid and electrolyte losses. Before severe diarrhea becomes evident, the horse may be depressed and off feed, and may have a fever and increased heart rate. Before developing acute diarrhea, some horses may show moderate colic and pass little manure. Dehydration may be evident as reduced skin elasticity when the skin on the side of the neck is pinched up into a tent. Laminitis may be an unfortunate complication of acute diarrhea.

Causes

The underlying cause of acute diarrhea can be difficult to determine, and may never be found. A common underlying factor is stress, such as from severe illness, long-term drug therapy, exhaustion from competition, shipping, hospitalization or difficult foaling.

Some causes of acute diarrhea including the following:

- Ingestion of sand: Eating sand can inflame the large colon, producing diarrhea. Usually there is no fever.
- Colic: Some horses develop diarrhea 1-3 days after colic from impaction (obstruction) of the bowel is resolved. Usually there is no fever.
- Salmonellosis: Infection with the bacterium *Salmonella* can cause diarrhea. Infected horses may have normal manure but then develop diarrhea when they are stressed. Though salmonellosis may not be contagious to other horses if they are unstressed, the contaminated equipment (buckets, tack) of infected horses should not be used on other horses unless it is first disinfected.
- Potomac Horse Fever: This is an infectious disease caused by the microorganism *Ehrlichia risticii*. It can occur as isolated cases or in clusters of cases in an area or on a farm. Infected horses often have a fever and the diarrhea is not always severe. Laminitis is a relatively common complication of this infection. A vaccine is available to help prevent Potomac horse fever.
- Acute colitis: A form of diarrhea known as “colitis X” may be an allergic reaction to certain drugs or an immune response to a previous upper respiratory infection. Fever may or may not be present. Severe colitis may also be caused by bacterial infection or unknown causes.
- Toxic reactions: The bowel may react to the toxins in certain plants, heavy-metal poisons, blister beetles and bacteria.