



Why is a rectal examination performed in horses with colic?

Rectal examination is the test that vets use most commonly to help them find out the cause of colic^{1,2}. Rectal examination involves the vet placing their hand and arm into the horse's rectum so that they can feel inside the abdomen. This enables them to identify anything that feels abnormal or out of place, and in many cases, it is an important part of deciding what next steps and treatments are required. This procedure is not without risk both to the horse and to the vet, but is often the only way to find out what is going on within the horse's abdomen. Rectal examination of a horse is a veterinary procedure, and should only be performed by a veterinary surgeon.



A rectal examination being undertaken by a vet

What happens during a rectal examination?

The horse has to be restrained quietly during this procedure. If you do not feel confident restraining your horse during a rectal examination, you must inform your vet. In veterinary hospitals, the horse may be placed in stocks (open-sided stall that limits the horse's movement) to help restrain it and reduce the risk of the vet being kicked. On the yard or field, the vet will often place the horse against a wall or hay/straw bales to help restrain it. Horses may require sedatives or relaxants for this procedure. The vet will then introduce their hand and arm gradually into the rectum, moving it slowly forwards and then feeling the different organs within the abdomen. Some of the key things that they will be feeling for are whether there is an impaction or feed blockage within the intestine, whether any of the intestine is displaced from its normal position, and whether there is a build-up of gas or fluid within the intestines. The vet can also feel other organs, such as the bladder, uterus, ovaries and spleen, and check for other possible causes of colic. The rectal examination is one of the most important diagnostic tests as it can be the only way of diagnosing some conditions, and specific abnormalities associated with critical or surgical cases.

Limitations and possible complications

There is a risk to the vet of being kicked or injured, and a rare but potentially serious risk to the horse of internal injury during the procedure. In addition, as the horse's abdomen is so large, it is not possible for the vet to feel everything so a potential problem could remain undetected during this procedure. The vet will weigh up the risks against the importance of the test in each case to make a decision on whether or not to proceed. If your horse has a specific condition such as an impaction, or a surgical problem, the rectal examination can give the earliest indication of a problem and the best chance of a successful treatment³.

If you have any concerns or queries about the procedure, you should discuss these with your vet.

1. Curtis, L., et al., Prospective study of the primary evaluation of 1016 horses with clinical signs of abdominal pain by veterinary practitioners, and the differentiation of critical and non-critical cases. *Acta Vet Scand*, 2015. 57: p. 69.
2. Curtis, L., et al., Veterinary practitioners' selection of diagnostic tests for the primary evaluation of colic in the horse. *Vet Rec Open*, 2015. 2(2): p. e000145.
3. Jennings, K., et al. Prospective survey of veterinary practitioners' primary assessment of equine colic: clinical features, diagnoses, and treatment of 120 cases of large colon impaction. *BMC Vet Res*, 2014. 10 DOI: 10.1186/1746-6148-10-S1-S2.

Photo: The University of Nottingham

For more information
please visit: bhs.org.uk/colic