



Horses that eat on sandy soil are more likely to develop colic.

HEALTH

Insidious Sand Colic

Horses living in gritty desert climates, such as Nevada, are at high risk of developing sand colic. Owners can reduce that risk with some simple management solutions.

By **KATIE FRANK**

IN THE ARID STATE of Nevada, surrounded by dry mountain ranges, the wind whips through and kicks up the sandy ground. It's in this type of climate that sand colic, an accumulation of sand in a horse's stomach, runs rampant. Leslie Schur, DVM, of Desert Pines Equine Medical and Surgical Center in Las Vegas is all too aware of the painful condition this time of year. Major changes in temperature, sandy soil and decreased water intake, common in winter months, can lead to a major blockage in the bowel. But with some practical changes to management, owners can keep their horses colic-free.

Schur recalls one of her most worrisome cases that happened to a roping horse many years ago. Her initial evaluation suggested the horse was suffering from a serious case of sand colic.

"[The impaction] felt like a stone, but I knew because of [what I felt during palpation], it wasn't a stone. It was probably the size of a volleyball," Schur recalls.

Schur tried to treat the gelding in the field by administering a sedative, then passing a nasogastric tube and flushing him with mineral oil, water and electrolytes. The gelding was also given the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug Banamine to ease some of the pain. This combination treatment can sometimes be enough to loosen an impaction and allow the veterinarian to remove the sand via rectal palpation.

"On [some] rectal exams, we pull out straight sand. It's awful. The clients are mortified," says Schur.

Unfortunately, the roping horse could not be treated in the field and was taken to the clinic for further monitoring. Due to high medical costs, the horse was not a candidate for surgery, a reality many horse owners face. Fortunately, the owner was able to keep him hospitalized until more information was gathered.

To make sure he stayed hydrated, the gelding was put on intravenous fluids and had a nasogastric tube passed several times a day for what Schur refers to as "oral hydration." But, after eight days of fluids, small, low-bulk meals and Banamine, the gelding showed little improvement.

On the eighth day of treatment, the client, who was known for taking good care of her horses, told Schur that she was out of funds and couldn't keep the horse hospitalized anymore.

ROSS HECOX

The gelding was sent home with detailed instructions on his diet and exercise program, and his owner loaded up on medications and anti-inflammatories. The only thing left to do was wait.

Finally, after a handful of days and disappointing “poop reports” to the clinic, Schur had an ecstatic visitor.

“Probably on the fourth or fifth day, [my client] came in jumping up and down, ‘Dr. Schur! I went out to the pen this morning and it looks like a cow had got loose! There were cow pies everywhere!’” says Schur.

Still, while this gelding was a success story, his case was exactly the kind Schur worries about.

“Those are the ones that I seriously have concerns of a catastrophic rupture because you have that heavy, heavy sand, and it’s impacted and [the horse is] trying to push it, and that’s where the bowel can just tear. And when that happens, of course, it’s rapidly fatal,” she says.

Horses in Nevada and surrounding regions are common victims of sand colic because of the environment. When horses forage on the ground, they ingest small amounts of sand that builds up in their gut. Schur says it’s a lot like a clogged pipe. Over time, the sand settles in the bottom of the “pipes” but still allows manure to pass through. However, there comes a critical point when the gunk fills to the top and the “pipes back up,” she says, adding, “That’s when you really have a problem.”

One management mistake that can lead to sand colic is the choice of footing Nevada owners often use in turnouts. Because of the high, whipping desert winds, many people use sand in their runs and pens because it doesn’t blow away and provides comfortable bedding. Schur strongly disapproves of this practice and always suggests that her clients to switch to dirt, shavings or something other than sand. She says that while it may seem

more cost-effective to invest in sand, in the long run it’s more detrimental to a horse’s health, and can prove costly to owners.

Sand colic seems to be seen most commonly in two different groups of horses. The first are those that have ingested debris that build up in their gut over time. The other group, in Schur’s experience, are “compulsive” cases.

“I’ve had some horses that have only been in the [Las Vegas] Valley for two or three months coming from a pasture situation,” she says. “It starts very natural; the horse thinks, ‘Well, I’m going to eat this stuff on the ground.’ Then I think it does become compulsive because I’ve had some of these horses on the surgery table within only two months of arriving, and they’ll have 50 to 80 pounds of sand in their belly. And you can’t just accidentally ingest that. They got compulsive about it.”



severe case of colic, one that also requires an immediate call to the veterinarian.

Luckily, the prognosis for colicky horses is typically good, and those that survive go on to lead normal lives. Changes in management are the keys to both prevention and reoccurrence.

Schur says her No. 1 recommendation to clients is to clear the environment of as much sand as possible.

“Everyone loves to tell us that they feed in feeders. Well, you know what, you put the hay in the feeder but it ends up [on the ground] anyway,” she says with a laugh.

Next, she advises feeding horses kept outside on large rubber mats that can be regularly swept. Placing the feeders on a sand-free surface is the easy part. However, as anyone who owns a horse knows, with a shuffle of steps debris can be kicked up, defeating the purpose of the mat.

Schur says she has some ingenious clients who have built platforms with railroad ties and feed their horses on

SIGNS OF COLIC

SIGNS OF SAND COLIC can vary. These all warrant a call to the veterinarian.

- ➔ Intermittent diarrhea
- ➔ Weight loss
- ➔ Pawing at the ground
- ➔ Constantly lying down and getting up
- ➔ Glancing at the belly.

That much sand is an extreme example of how much can accumulate in the stomach, but it’s not uncommon, Schur says.

If the horse has a large impaction, the intestines that are in front of the blockage can painfully build up with gas, increasing the risk of rupture. This will leave a horse in serious pain and, as a result, on the ground. This is a

the raised area. That way, when the horse walks, it’s less likely to sprinkle sand on the higher ground.

Finally, Schur recommends feeding a psyllium supplement in addition to ensuring a clean, fresh water source. Psyllium, made from the seed of the fleawort plant, swells and becomes a gel-like substance when it comes in contact with moisture. When fed, it

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can bind with small amounts of sand and carry it out when passed through the horse. Schur points out that while psyllium cannot totally prevent sand colic, it can help slow the buildup.

Horses who constantly nibble at the ground, compared to horses who stand around dozing, can benefit from a bit more hay, such as Bermudagrass, to munch on throughout the day.

"That does a couple of things," says Schur. "It keeps the horse busy, so they're eating something rather than foraging around on the dirt and taking in sand, and it gives them additional fiber and keeps the belly moving. I always tell people, I believe a busy colon is a happy colon. [If the colon] keeps moving and it has a job, [the horse] is not going to have as many problems."

Hey nets and slow feeders, which have smaller holes that force the horse to eat smaller and more frequent bites mimicking grazing, are useful to feed hay and can reduce the amount of strewn waste.

With simple changes in management, horses can stay happy, healthy, and free of sand colic. 🐾



Leslie Schur, DVM, of Desert Pines Equine Medical and Surgical Center in Las Vegas, Nevada, sees many sand colic cases when temperatures drastically change.

COURTESY/LESLIE SCHUR, DVM