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If your horse tends to colic, it's probably best to get him out in the field, researchers say. That's even more important if he has stereotypies like cribbing, windsucking, or weaving.

According to a recent study, horses with recurrent colic have fewer repeat episodes on average when they spend more time at pasture. But cribbing, windsucking, and even weaving increase the risk of repeat colic.

"Horses are naturally 'trickle feeders' designed to forage for their food, and providing access to pasture can provide for this physiological need," said Claire Scantlebury, BSc BVSc PhD MRCVS, Department of Epidemiology and Population Health in the School of Veterinary Science at the University of Liverpool in Wirral, the UK. "There are a variety of other benefits (of pasture time) in addition to promoting digestive health, such as allowing expression of natural behavior, opportunities for social interactions with other horses, and exercise."

In their pioneering study identifying risk factors for recurrent colic, Scantlebury and her fellow researchers followed 59 cases of repeat colic and 177 control cases in which the horses did not colic again. Repeat colic was defined as a second case of colic that occurred between 48 hours and one year of a previous case, providing the horse was eating normally, passing normal droppings, and showing no further signs of colic within 48 hours. The median time of recurrence was 101 days, but some horses had several cases of colic within a year. One horse even had five cases in the one-year study period.

Using both veterinary records and owner reports, the scientists were able to establish specific trends that related to the recurrence of colic. They found that as pasture time increased, repeat colic risk decreased. But with stereotypies—even weaving, which had not previously been associated with colic—came an increased risk of repeat colic.

They also noticed a slight trend towards repeat colic associated with the use of probiotics, but more research must be carried out to confirm that link, Scantlebury said.

The researchers also identified a possible link between feeding fruit and vegetables (e.g. apples and carrots) and a reduced risk of colic in horses with stereotypies, although further research is needed to give specific recommendations to horse owners, Scantlebury said.

"These are intriguing findings," she added, "It may be that this is linked with particular decisions made by individual owners about how they feed their horses rather than a physiological basis; it is hard to say from this data. These findings prompt the need for more focused research in the area of equine nutrition and the impact on equine health."

While increased pasture time appears to be a definite risk-reducer for recurrent colic, it's hard to say how much time should be given to each horse, Scantlebury added. Any changes in pasture time (or diet) need to be made very gradually (over 2-3 weeks) and also need to take into consideration the horse's metabolic health in order to prevent laminitis and other diseases.

Other methods to reduce colic risk include regular dental check-ups, providing access to water and addressing parasite burden. Scantlebury said she recommends that owners check the university's [colic website](#) and contact a veterinarian to help find the right balance for their specific horse.

The study, "[Management and horse-level risk factors for recurrent colic in the UK general equine practice population](#)," will appear in an upcoming issue of the *Equine Veterinary Journal*.