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Surgical vs. Medical Cecal Impaction Management

When your horse starts displaying signs of colic—decreased manure production, a lack of appetite, or pain—your first call should be to your veterinarian. While some mild colics can pass without much trouble, other types must be diagnosed and treated quickly—medically or surgically—to improve the horse's likelihood of survival. One of those types of colic is a cecal impaction (an impaction in the cecum, part of the horse's hindgut), which can have life-threatening complications if not diagnosed and treated promptly.

"Cecal impaction is not a common type of colic, but because of the risk of sudden (cecum) rupture, it is important for it to be quickly diagnosed and treated," said Maia Ramirez Aitken, DVM, a lecturer in emergency and critical care at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine's New Bolton Center, in Kennett Square. Aitken and her colleagues recently completed a study in which they evaluated the outcome of surgical and medical management on cecal impaction in 150 horses treated between 1991 and 2001.

Thirty-eight horses (25%) suffered cecal rupture prior to arriving at the hospital and could not be treated, and three additional horses were euthanized without treatment, Aitken said.

More than 60% of horses treated for cecal impaction had a recent disease or unrelated surgical procedure. "We cannot say this predisposed those horses to a cecal impaction because we didn't look at horses with other types of colic, but it is historically anecdotal," Aitken said.

Based on their study results, Aitken and her colleagues generally recommend treating cecal impactions surgically rather than medically, as a result of an increased survival rate with surgically managed horses (82%). Still, 61% of horses managed medically survived.

"If medical management is the only option for the horse and owner, that is okay," she said. "The owner should simply be aware of the risk of rupture."

She also noted that medical management might be indicated in some geographic areas: "In areas where horses are fed coastal Bermuda hay, there have been higher reported success rates with medical management, compared to our population."

The study, "[Outcome of Surgical and Medical Management of Cecal Impaction in 150 Horses \(1991-2011\)](#)," will appear in an upcoming issue of *Veterinary Surgery*.