

Horse Health:

Diarrhoea

What is it?

Diarrhoea in horses refers to the passing of loose or watery droppings. It can range from mild and short-lived to severe and life-threatening. While occasional soft droppings may not be a major concern, persistent or sudden diarrhoea - especially when accompanied by other symptoms - should be taken seriously.

What causes it?

There are many potential causes of diarrhoea in horses, and they often overlap.

The main categories include:

- **Infectious causes:** Bacterial infections like *Salmonella* can cause acute, severe diarrhoea. These cases may lead to dehydration, colic, and even laminitis due to toxin build-up.
- **Parasitic causes:** Intestinal worms, especially small redworms (*Cyathostomes*), are known culprits. They can cause serious diarrhoea, particularly in younger horses.
- **Dietary issues:** Sudden changes in feed, access to lush pasture, or overeating cereals can disrupt gut bacteria and cause diarrhoea. Sandy soils may also contribute to “sand colic.”
- **Inflammatory conditions:** Chronic inflammation of the bowel can lead to diarrhoea, weight loss, and difficulty maintaining condition.
- **Cancers:** Though rare, bowel tumours can result in diarrhoea and other symptoms.

- **Drugs or toxins:** Some medications, like phenylbutazone (“bute”) or antibiotics, can trigger diarrhoea. Always follow veterinary guidance when administering medication, and notify your vet immediately of any side effects. Some plant toxins, such as the tannins found in acorns, can also be a cause.

What horses are at risk?

Any horse can develop diarrhoea, but some are more vulnerable:

- **Young horses:** More susceptible to parasitic causes, like small redworm (*Cyathostomes*).
- **Older horses:** May be prone to inflammatory bowel disease or cancer.
- **Horses under stress:** Transport, competition, or changes in environment can disrupt gut health.
- **Horses on medication:** Especially those receiving antibiotics or anti-inflammatories.
- **Horses with poor worm control:** Lack of a proper worming plan increases risk.
- **Horses exposed to plant toxins:** Horses in poor pasture, or those where a lot of acorns fall, are at increased risk.

What are the symptoms?

The most obvious sign is loose or watery droppings, but other symptoms may include:

- Signs of colic (pawing, rolling, discomfort)
- Dehydration (sunken eyes, dry gums)
- Protein loss, leading to swellings of the jaw, head and legs, and sometimes under the belly.
- Lethargy or depression
- Loss of appetite

- Weight loss
- Fever
- Laminitis (in severe cases)

If your horse shows any of these signs, especially in combination, contact your vet promptly.

How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis starts with a thorough veterinary examination. Your vet may:

- Assess hydration and temperature
- Take a detailed history of diet, environment, and recent changes
- Collect dung samples for lab testing (especially to detect bacteria like *Salmonella*)
- Perform blood tests to check for inflammation or organ stress
- Use ultrasound or endoscopy in chronic or unclear cases

Because some bacteria (like *Salmonella*) are only shed intermittently, multiple samples may be needed over several days.

How can it be treated or managed?

Treatment depends on the cause and severity; and should always be led by your vet.

Mild cases:

Often managed with dietary adjustments and supportive care. Make sure your horse has free access to clean water, and high-quality hay or haylage. Monitor closely, and call the vet if complications occur.

Severe cases:

In horses who are showing signs of dehydration or toxicity, management

at home may not be an option. In many cases, this will require hospitalisation, intravenous fluids, and aggressive treatment.

Infectious diarrhoea:

Isolation is crucial to prevent spread. Antibiotics may be used if appropriate, based on your vet's advice. Barrier nursing to prevent the spread of infection is very important, especially with *Salmonella*.

Parasitic diarrhoea:

The mainstay of treatment is targeted worming based on faecal egg counts. However, in the case of a mass emergence of small redworm, more aggressive therapy potentially including steroids and even plasma transfusions may be needed.

Inflammatory or dietary causes:

Diagnosis of the underlying cause and addressing it is essential. However, supportive therapy may be useful, such as adjustments to feed, use of probiotics, and anti-inflammatory medications.

Always follow your vet's advice. In serious cases, the priority is stabilising the horse and preventing complications like laminitis or shock.

Can it be prevented?

While not all cases are preventable, there are steps you can take to reduce the risk:

- **Introduce dietary changes gradually:** Sudden shifts can upset gut bacteria.
- **Secure your feed room:** Prevent accidental overeating.
- **Manage pasture access:** Limit time on lush grass, especially in spring.
- **Minimise stress:** Avoid long journeys or abrupt changes in routine.

- **Use probiotics:** Some owners find these helpful to maintain gut function during stressful periods.
- **Implement a worm control plan:** Include regular poo-picking, faecal worm egg counts, and targeted worming.
- **Avoid unnecessary medications:** Only use antibiotics or anti-inflammatories when prescribed by a vet.