

Sand Colic and Feeding

Ingestion of sand and subsequent accumulation can cause a variety of clinical symptoms in your horse. Signs of large amounts of sand in a horse's intestine range from poor weight gain or weight loss in spite of an otherwise adequate diet to intermittent diarrhea or frequent to severe episodes of colic.

All horses in our area are at risk for having problems with sand. The soil in our area is naturally very sandy, so any horse that spends any time eating feed whether it is in the form of hay, green grass, or on the ground is prone to ingest some sand. Dietary changes can prevent problems with sand. The first step in prevention is to feed off of the ground in tubs, bins or wall feeders. While many horses still pull at least half of their feed out of any feeder and finish it on the ground, these horses are still spending 50% less time eating on the ground. In addition, placing rubber mats under and around feeders will help prevent horses from eating directly on the ground.

The second step in sand prevention is feeding psyllium, the indigestible fiber found in Metamucil or Equi-aid. Psyllium will aid in the removal of sand from the gastrointestinal tract and prevent build up if fed on a regular basis. Beet pulp has also been effective in preventing sand accumulation. It contains an indigestible fiber similar to that of psyllium. Its main advantage over psyllium is that it is less expensive. Beet pulp is also a source of soluble carbohydrate so it provides some extra calories and may be especially useful for those "hard keepers." The disadvantages of beet pulp are that to be effective it must be fed daily and it must be soaked for 12-18 hours before feeding or it has the potential to cause impaction colic. Finally, many people believe that they are controlling sand by feeding bran mashes. Although bran is a good laxative, it is ineffectual at removing sand.

We strongly recommend that every horse owner in our practice take steps to prevent sand accumulation and colic before it becomes a problem.