

## Sand Colic; a silent but deadly killer

**Sand Colic; a silent but deadly killer**

By Lisa Ross-Williams



The signs were becoming more obvious. The chronic diarrhea, unexplained weight loss and more frequent mild colics were taking its toll on the big draft gelding. Thankfully, his new caretaker recognized the signs of sand colic, takes appropriate action and prevented what might have been an agonizing death. By recognizing the signs, understanding why sand colic happens and what can be done to prevent and treat it, horse guardians in at-risk regions can avert this horrible condition from becoming a death sentence.

**Sand; a passive enemy**

Sand colic occurs when a horse is ingesting sand but not passing it through his system resulting in build-up in the intestinal system, cecum, or large colon. If not alleviated, this can result in death due to intestinal rupture or large colon displacement. This accumulation of sand can take months and by the time a horse has ingested enough to show signs, he already has 30-80 pounds in his gut.

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### Signs of sand issues

During the initial stages, chronic loose stools or diarrhea are seen progressing over time to frequent mild colics and unexplained weight loss. If the situation is not corrected, impaction occurs and signs may include pain, loss of appetite, hard manure covered in sticky mucus or no manure at all. Veterinary intervention is required at this stage.

### Why some and not others?

Sand colic doesn't happen just because a horse eats off sandy ground. If this were the case, the wild horses in the Southwest or Nebraska would be dying in droves. Instead it goes back to horses who are consuming excess amounts of sand or the amount they're ingesting is not being moved through normal peristaltic movement.

### Common contributors to unnatural sand accumulation:

- **Not enough exercise.** Frequent exercise through 24/7 turnout and riding results in proper gut movement and allows sand to pass.
- **Mineral deficiency.** Horses lacking the necessary minerals may eat sand and soil in an attempt to supplement what their body needs.
- **Dental issues.** Without proper dental care, sharp points and hooks can develop which damage the cheeks and tongue. Horses have been known to eat sand and rocks in an attempt to break off these points.
- **Not enough fiber and infrequent feeding.** Horses are meant to eat a high fiber (hay or grass) diet frequently throughout their day which has amazing sand carrying results. Failure to allow this hinders the horse's natural ability to remove sand.
- **Stress and boredom.** Horses are very oral animals and fixations with eating foreign objects can arise when bored or worried.
- **Over-grazed pastures.** Pasture grasses can become too short when over-grazed causing horses to pull up the plants, roots and all. Supplement with hay when this is the case.
- **Chronic scroungers.** There are always those horses that must get every last scrap of food and a rubber mat placed under his dish and hay can go a long way.

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### Feedstuffs for prevention

In addition to proper lifestyle, there are two substances which can be fed that are beneficial in preventing sand accumulation. **Flaxseed** has great sand moving abilities with the added benefit of supplying Essential Fatty Acids. Once it enters the digestive track it turns gel-like, trapping and carrying sand out of the system. ½-1 cup of ground flax per day. **Psyllium**, made from the Fleawort seed, is a common product which turns gelatinous when ingested, collecting sand and lubricating it's passage. Feed for one week a month in at-risk areas.

### Natural support options

If sand accumulation is suspected, there are some beneficial natural support options to consider.

- Homeopathic Silicea is beneficial in many suppurative processes which includes sand accumulation. If inexperienced with homeopathy, consult a professional for dosing suggestions.
- Offer herbs which sooth and lubricate the gut. A handful of dried Chamomile flowers per day for up to three months is beneficial. If experienced in herb use for horses or upon the advice of an equine herbalist, a blend of mucilangius and carminative herbs might include peppermint, marshmallow root, slippery elm bark and milk thistle.
- Aloe Vera juice made for internal use is great for hydrating the bowels and protecting the gut lining. Not for use in pregnant mares.



### Sand in a bottle

Being proactive in horse care is important and this simple test can help you gauge your horse's sand moving ability.

Using a small glass jar, add 5-6 fecal balls, fill half with water and shake or stir until dissolved. Wait 10-15 minutes and observe the amount of sand in the bottom. More than a tablespoon may indicate a need for lifestyle changes to decrease sand ingestion.

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If done on a frequent basis, a baseline amount can be determined and any sudden decrease in sand indicates more might be accumulating in the gut.



Although sand colic can be a life-threatening condition, it is preventable. By ensuring correct feeding and care practices while being aware of the signs of sand build-up, you will avert this too common problem before it strikes your equine partner.

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*Lisa has dedicated herself to extensive research, as well as an exploration of hands-on experiences which included clinics, seminars and courses covering natural horsemanship, hoof care, dentistry, bodywork, homeopathy, iridology, essential oils and nutrition. Since then, she has earned her degree in Environmental Plant Science and has completed the Basic Homeopathy Veterinary course through the British Institute of Homeopathy.*

*Known to colleagues and friends as one who "walks her talk," Lisa has positively influenced thousands of horse owners and grateful horses, sharing her knowledge of natural and holistic horse care.*