Has your horse ever exhibited abdominal pain by rolling on the ground, lying down repeatedly, pawing, stretching or an anxious attitude? If so, your horse may be exhibiting colic.

Dr. Lisa Nesson from Irongate Equine Clinic in Madison, describes colic as “a clinical sign or a term used to describe abdominal pain.”

Dr. Nesson explains that colic or abdominal pain can come from anywhere or any organ in the abdomen. However, it is most commonly related to a disorder of the digestive tract.

As an ambulatory veterinarian, the most common type of colic seen by Dr. Nesson is impactions of the large colon. Gas and irregular motility colics are also common but often resolve prior to her arrival on the farm.

Colic can be caused by numerous factors including changes in diet, exercise or routine and environment. Poor diet and parasite control, recent deworming, dehydration and age also contribute to colic.

Although colic is an uncomfortable feeling for your horse, some episodes may be avoided. Dr. Nesson suggests the following tips to prevent colic.

- Have forage available to horses throughout the day. This helps mimic their natural feeding schedule.
- Feed quality feed, with an emphasis on an adequate forage source, on a regular basis.
- Offer palatable water at all times.
- Exercise horses regularly.
- Make slow diet changes, especially if moving from a lower energy feed source to a higher energy feed source.
- Provide routine preventative care. This includes deworming and dental care to allow adequate chewing.

If you think your horse is exhibiting colic, consult with your veterinarian. They are there to educate you on how to manage your animals, provide preventative care, and discuss treatment options.

“Our role in treating colic is to determine the diagnosis or source of pain if possible and make appropriate treatment recommendation based on that diagnosis,” says Dr. Nesson.

Treatment procedures will vary with each case from referral to surgery or treatment on the farm.

According to Dr. Nesson, the main treatment options are pain management with medication and sedation, fluid therapy to correct dehydration, administering laxatives and emptying the stomach of excess gas or fluid.

Colic can be more prevalent at certain times of the year. Dr. Nesson notices an increase in colic when there are significant temperature changes or prolonged periods of extreme temperatures (hot or cold). Colic is also seen in the spring as horses are being reintroduced to green growing pastures. This is due to a change in the diet from a low energy source to a high energy source.

Dr. Nesson emphasizes that colic is a clinical sign so a horse could be colicking due to a simple gas bubble, large colon impaction, a large colon torsion, a small intestinal volvulus or some other cause. There is always a reason or source of the pain.

To learn more about colic and what you can do to prevent it in your horses, contact your WVMA member veterinarian. Find one online at www.wvma.org .