



Colic: The decision to refer

Colic is responsible for 1 in 3 emergency equine veterinary call-outs and is a major cause of death or euthanasia in horses.

In this article, we focus on various aspects of referral and surgery for colic. You can find more information on this topic on The [British Horse Society's](#) website.

The decision to refer

If your horse gets colic and the vet advises you that referral to an equine hospital is either advisable or necessary, you will need to make a rapid decision about whether you want to do this. In many cases, if you choose not to refer, the only other humane option will be euthanasia.

This will almost certainly be a difficult decision and will be made more difficult by the urgency of the situation. However, if your horse is going to be referred, it is important that any delays are minimised –thinking about this decision before it happens will ensure that it is made quickly and will help to improve your horse's outcome.

You will need to consider a number of factors in your decision – some will be related to your horse, some will be personal to you, and some will relate to the logistics of what you can manage at the time of the colic and afterwards (Figure 1).

We strongly recommend you download and complete the BHS [emergency care plan](#) which will allow you to record your preferences regarding the decision making process and provide vital information if someone discovers your horse in an emergency and you are not immediately contactable

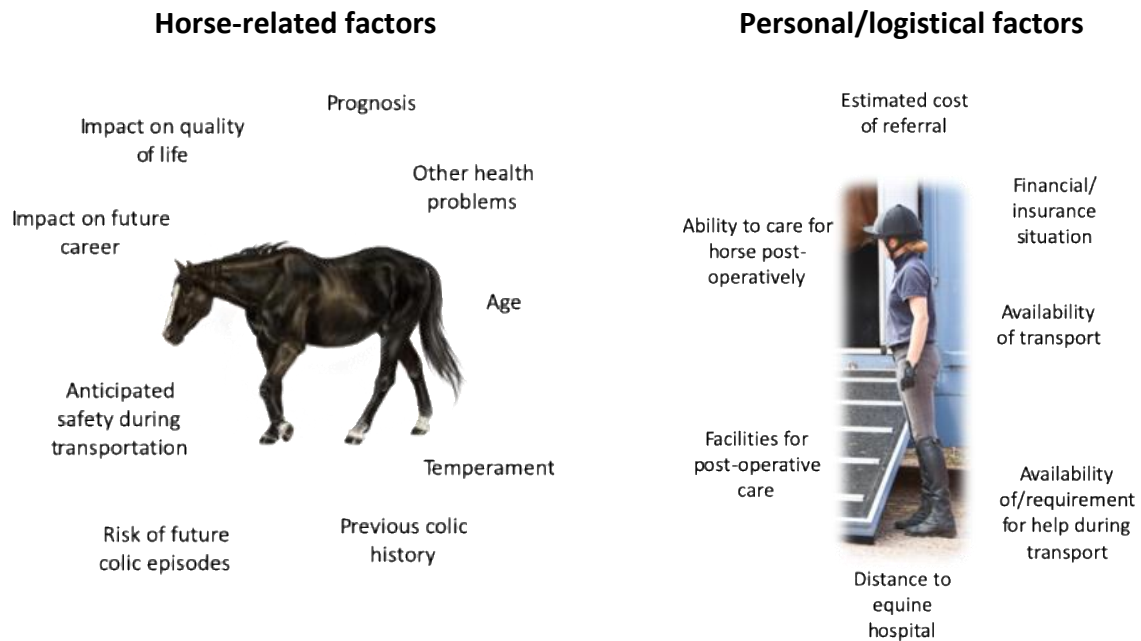


Figure 1. Factors that may influence the decision for referral

How to plan ahead

It is easy to put off this kind of forward planning – if you have never seen a serious case of colic then it will probably seem like a remote possibility. But colic can strike at any time and it is valuable to go through this process now so that you are ready. It may be helpful to team up with a friend to go through the questions and actions listed below – you need to think this through in sufficient depth that the decision you make at 2 am with a critically ill horse still feels right in the weeks that follow.

Things to do

- Decide:
 - How much you could afford to spend on your horse (see 'Colic: Costs and insurance cover' for more information on the costs of colic treatment)
 - How much treatment (surgery, etc.) you would be happy with
 - Whether you and your horse would be suited to post-operative care – this includes factors such as the horse's temperament, and the facilities and amount of time that you have available
- Know what your insurance policy does and doesn't cover (see 'Colic: Costs and insurance cover' for more information on insurance)
- Ensure your transport is always roadworthy or find an experienced equine transport company that operates 24/7
- Ensure that your horse loads easily
- Designate a friend who is willing to accompany you to the hospital (a 'colic buddy')
- Always have to hand:
 - Emergency contact numbers
 - Insurance details
 - Essential travelling documents, including the horse's passport

- Ensure that a friend/the livery yard knows where this information is
- Tell a friend, the livery yard manager and your veterinary practice what you would do if your horse had colic (in case you cannot be contacted)

A horse's chance of recovery from surgery/intensive medical care, and of returning to the current level of work, may form an important part of your decision. This is not something that you can plan for in advance as it will depend on the cause of the colic and on how sick your horse is at the time of referral. It may be helpful to read our article 'Critical colic cases', which provides an overview of outcomes after surgery. However, each case is different and your horse's chance of recovery may be substantially better or worse than the averages quoted in that article.

If you are faced with a critical case of colic, your vet is best placed to answer questions about your horse's chance of recovery and to help you make the decision that is right for your personal circumstances.