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RECOVERING FROM COLIC SURGERY

Surgery is one of those necessary evils. It helps your horse overcome whatever is ailing him, and at the same time, gives him a new list of ailments – pain, inflammation, risk of infection, and suppressed immune function due to the hormonal changes that arise from enduring physical and mental stress.

Recover from colic surgery is particularly challenging because the very route of nutrition – the digestive tract – is impaired. Things that your horse normally would eat, such as hay, may cause further harm. Surgery to the digestive tract leads to a decline in motility. Therefore, feed has to be gradually re-introduced, with small, frequent feedings of highly digestible feedstuffs, such as:

- Fresh pasture -- has less bulk and is more digestible than hay
- Alfalfa leaves -- offer protein and are well tolerated in most cases
- Complete pellets -- can be moistened and are fortified with vitamins and minerals
- Psyllium and beet pulp – offer water soluble fiber

Nutrient supplementation will make a difference. Some important guidelines:

- **Avoid soybean or corn oils.** These are high in inflammatory omega-6 fatty acids. While inflammation has a role in healing, too much can create further damage, lengthen healing time, and cause excess pain.
- **Offer two sources of omega 3s – plant and fish oils.** Flax and chia seeds are balanced in their omega 3 to omega 6 content and contain the essential, alpha linolenic acid (ALA); fish oils

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contain eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). EPA and DHA can be made by the body from ALA, but adding extra will serve to aggressively reduce inflammation.

- **Provide high quality protein for tissue repair.** Grass hay does not provide all of the necessary amino acids. Supplement with alfalfa, or provide a protein supplement.
- **Add vitamins C and E.** These are potent antioxidants, neutralizing damaging free radicals. This improves immune function, paving the way for recovery. Vitamin E also helps inhibit formation of adhesions.
- **Supplement B vitamins.** These are necessary for rebuilding healthy tissue. It's best to offer a B-complex preparation.
- **Add a probiotic.** Antibiotics kill harmful bacteria, as well as beneficial hindgut bacteria. Offer a probiotic that contains billions (not millions) of colony forming units (CFUs).

Knowing what caused the problem will help avoid another episode. *Colic can be prevented.* Free-choice forage, eliminating cereal grains, movement (avoiding confinement to a stall), and stress reduction will go a long way in keeping your horse healthy.

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