

# Diagnostics and Treatments in Chronic Diarrhea and Weight Loss in Horses

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## KEYWORDS

• Horse • Chronic diarrhea • Neoplasia • Inflammatory bowel disease

## KEY POINTS

- Chronic diarrhea in horses is defined as a diarrhea that has lasted several days with no improvement.
- It is the result of large intestinal diseases in the adult horse.
- Weight loss is a common finding in chronic diarrhea.
- There are many limitations to treatment of chronic diarrhea given the limited numbers in which a final diagnosis can be achieved.

Chronic diarrhea in the horse is defined as diarrhea present for more than several days with little if any improvement. There has not been consensus as to the duration of the diarrhea to become chronic. Different investigators have used different cutoff points that range from 7 days to 1 month.<sup>1-4</sup> Chronic diarrhea in the adult horse usually is a sign of large intestinal or colonic disease<sup>5</sup> and originates from a plethora of disease conditions (**Boxes 1** and **2**). These cases are usually the result of either a chronic inflammatory process or a disruption of normal physiologic homeostasis.<sup>6</sup> It often results in chronic weight loss.

## PATIENT HISTORY

Chronic diarrhea can occur in horses of any age, sex, or breed,<sup>7</sup> and it has been suggested to be more common in Standardbreds.<sup>8</sup> The diarrhea has persisted for weeks or months.<sup>1,3</sup> In some cases, it is a sequel of acute diarrhea, and in other cases, there are episodes of chronic diarrhea interspersed with periods of normal feces.<sup>1,6</sup> Fecal consistency is reported to vary from watery to semisolid.<sup>2-7</sup> Weight loss is frequently reported.<sup>2-7</sup> Colic or recurrent colic might have occurred.<sup>2</sup> Deworming history may indicate an inadequate program.<sup>2,8</sup>

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**Box 1****Common causes of chronic diarrhea in horses**

Chronic parasitism (cyathostomosis, large strongyle infection, other enteric parasites)

Salmonellosis

Equine proliferative enteropathy (*L. intracellularis*)

*Rodococcus equi* (ulcerative enterothyphlo-colitis)

Peritonitis

Idiopathic colonic dysfunction

Inflammatory bowel disease

- Eosinophilic enteritis and multisystemic eosinophilic epitheliotropic disease
- Granulomatous enteritis
- Lymphocytic/plasmacytic enteritis/colitis
- Lymphosarcoma

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug toxicity (right dorsal colitis)

Sand enteropathy

Equine gastric ulcer syndrome

Data from Refs. <sup>1-8</sup>

**PHYSICAL EXAMINATION**

- A thorough physical examination is mandatory in the cases of chronic diarrhea because it is frequently associated with other diseases.<sup>7</sup>
- Rectal temperature, heart rate, and respiratory rate are frequently within normal ranges; however, some cases show pyrexia that can be persistent or intermittent.

**Box 2****Less common diseases associated with chronic diarrhea**

Enteroliths

Cecal impactions

Chronic intussusceptions

Pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction

Hyperlipemia

Abdominal abscess

Abdominal neoplasia

Chronic liver disease

Congestive heart failure

Pancreatic disease

Chronic renal failure

Malnutrition/starvation

*Brachyspira pilosicoli*

Grass sickness

Data from Refs. <sup>2-11</sup>

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