

Manure – How do you like *those* apples?!
Emily Steele, DVM
Sunrise Equine Veterinary Services
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For most horse owners, manure is a constant chore. We clean it up, but it just keeps coming. It stinks, it makes a mess, and it's not very pretty to look at. However, despite its stinky reputation, manure can provide a wealth of information concerning your horse's health.

Most equine parasites use the intestinal tract for at least part of their life cycle. Therefore, almost all parasites find their way into manure. You can use this fact to judge how well your deworming program is working for your horse. While following your veterinarian's regular deworming schedule is an excellent way to control parasites, these worms have the ability to become resistant to certain dewormers. Manure can be tested regularly for parasite larvae and eggs by your veterinarian. In some horses with heavy parasite loads, you can see adult parasites with the naked eye! If you notice adult parasites in your horse's feces, contact your veterinarian immediately for a safe deworming protocol.

A common cause of colic in our area is sand colic. When eating off the ground or living in sandy environments, horses can ingest fairly large quantities of sand. This sand moves poorly through the intestinal tract and can cause irritation and eventually blockage (impaction) in the intestines. Once sand causes an impaction, it can be very difficult to remove and may require surgery. How do we detect excess sand in our horses' diets? By using manure! Collect a small amount of fresh fecal material and place it in a clear plastic glove or bag. Add water to the container and mix. If after approximately 5-10 minutes, more than a few grains of sand have settled to the bottom of the glove or bag, there is excess sand in your horse's diet. If sand is noticed early on, it can be treated by feeding management and a product called Sand Relief™.

Horses with dental issues show many different clinical signs. These include dropping feed, weight loss, and even choking on feed. Yet another sign can show up in - yep, you guessed it - manure. Proper chewing is an important first step in digestion and horses with dental issues often produce manure with coarse fibers, and sometimes undigested grain in their feces. Veterinarians recommend dental examinations once or twice per year to prevent dental issues. If you notice any of these signs in your horse's feces, it's definitely time to call your veterinarian for a dental exam.

Manure is also an important indicator of your horse's hydration status. Normal manure is soft and very pliable when first passed. When squeezed or stepped on, normal manure will usually exude liquid. If your horse is passing hard, dry fecal balls, it is very likely that he is mildly dehydrated. Horses often allow themselves to become mildly dehydrated during stress or changes in the weather. By identifying and addressing this problem early on, you can help prevent more severe dehydration, choke and colic in your horse. Keeping a clean water tank, preventing stray voltage, and heating your water tank in the winter are very effective methods of increasing your horse's water intake.

It is also important to keep in mind the components of manure we can't see with the naked eye. Normal manure contains many microscopic organisms, such as bacteria, protozoa and yeast. These organisms are essential for proper digestion in the horse. Stress, diet, and disease can lead to changes in the type and quantities of yeast and bacteria in your horse's gastrointestinal tract. Long after the initial cause may have resolved, these imbalances may remain. The imbalance alone can cause irritation and poor nutrient absorption, which again in turn can result in weight loss, colic, or diarrhea. Several products, such as Fast Track™, a bacterial supplement and Yeast-MOS, a yeast supplement, are available through your veterinarian. These products can be used as a daily supplement to promote a healthy gastrointestinal tract and to prevent any of the aforementioned imbalances.

A very obvious change in manure that we all easily recognize is diarrhea. In the horse and other species, diarrhea can have many causes. Infectious disease, parasites, stress, feeding changes, organ disease and cancer are all causes of diarrhea. Older horses have been known to develop diarrhea in the winter in the absence of any of the above causes. This may be due to changes in the amount of sunlight or perhaps the absence of certain nutrients only present in grass. However, at any time of year, diarrhea can be a sign of severe disease and can quickly lead to severe dehydration in your horse. Therefore, no matter the cause, it is very important to speak with your veterinarian when diarrhea develops.

Another important change that we should not ignore is when your horse stops producing manure. The average horse produces 8-12 piles of manure each day. Horses that are stressed, dehydrated, or are in the beginning stages of colic often make less manure or stop all together. Although less manure means less work for you, it could indicate a serious problem in your horse and should be immediately investigated.

Manure can provide a great deal of information about the day-to-day health of your horse. By paying close attention to changes in your horse's manure, you may be able to prevent serious illness and a very big vet bill in the future. So, before you shovel out that stall every morning, take a good look at your horse's manure. It may just be trying to tell you something!