

## Odd Posture to Poop

**Q** I have a 9-year-old gelding who holds his body in a strange position while defecating. He curves his head to the left, then brings the left hind leg forward while passing feces. His whole body is in a curve to the left. His penis will be fully extended out of his sheath at the end of the fecal movement.

There was a period of about a year where he colicked frequently, about every two to three weeks. Usually it was relieved with walking and Banamine. I did have a vet do a rectal exam to check for anatomical issues, but nothing was found. Despite using psyllium for four to five days per month, he was still colicking, so we ruled out sand colic. Another vet suggested checking for sand with the rectal glove, where you put three to four “apples” in the glove, add water, and shake. We found ½ inch of sand/dirt in each finger! Immediate measures were taken—we fed the horse hay in a Rubbermaid 100-gallon trough, and we used psyllium and bran for about three weeks.

Well, that fixed the colic problem, but the question is whether the strange body posturing is related to having had colic often (this was about two to three years ago). And why does the penis fully extend at the end of a fecal movement? We checked his penis for a “bean,” and all is fine there.

Any ideas? Honestly, before the colicking episodes, he was mostly pastured, so I didn’t notice the behavior then.

He is in the corral more now, and he does this every time he defecates.

*Fiona Gammonley, via e-mail*

**A** That sure does sound like a truly odd defecation posture. As to your question about it being related to the frequent colic a couple years ago, were you wondering if during the period of frequent colic he contorted his body in this fashion to be more comfortable to defecate, then even though the discomfort of the sand colic had been resolved, he continues to posture in this way, presumably as a result of learning?

If that is what you are thinking, I can say that I have seen many horses that developed odd postures of one type or another to relieve physical discomfort, some for many years before the cause was found and alleviated. I have always been impressed



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The gelding might have adopted this odd posture to relieve physical discomfort while defecating.

that once the physical discomfort is relieved, the posture immediately returns to normal. Most of the cases I recall were odd urination postures that were associated with urinary tract infections or lesions.

I do remember one horse that had odd defecation behavior. It turned out to be in association with an infection of his internal accessory sex glands. Our understanding of the posturing was that as feces passed through the rectum it was very near and probably put some pressure on these structures that were distended and sensitive as a result of the infection. It was noticeably worse when the feces were dry, as opposed to when they were softer. As the infection cleared, the odd behavior subsided.

Has your vet observed your horse defecating? Does your horse look uncomfortable? For example, does he grunt, groan, or sigh? Does he appear to hesitate? Are urination stance and stream, as well as spontaneous erection and penile movements, all normal?

If he does look uncomfortable, my advice would be to ask your veterinarian to help you to keep looking for something physical that is making defecation uncomfortable. It can be quite challenging in many cases to diagnose some of these unusual behavior problems.

From your description, it would seem

that anything irritating in the caudal (toward the rear of the) rectum, the anus, or along the pelvic urethra near the rectum could be uncomfortable. Sometimes an equine behavior expert who is experienced at observing both normal and abnormal horse behavior and postures, and localizing signs of discomfort, can be a helpful member of the team. The expert likely will want to view at least a few hours of video of the horse on his own in a stall or in a paddock. Sometimes subtle signs of discomfort become evident that provide some direction as to where the discomfort might be.

For example, your horse might rub or lean his hind end against objects/walls. Or he might frequently shift his weight or slap his tail. Or he might gaze back at his tail area. Is there evidence of neurologic dysfunction that might affect defecation and penis position? This can sometimes greatly reduce the number of diagnostic procedures required to find the problem. 🐾

*Amy Johnson, DVM, Dipl. ACVIM, of the University of Pennsylvania’s New Bolton Center consulted with me on this question.*

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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