

Equine Gastric Ulceration Syndrome – Could my horse be affected?



What is it?

Gastric ulcers are areas of damage to the lining of the horse's stomach. They occur in two main areas – most commonly on the upper (squamous) area of the stomach, but also on the lower (glandular) area where acid for digestion is produced.

Traditionally ulcers were thought to be mainly found in racehorses and studies have shown that up to 90 % of racehorses have a degree of gastric ulceration, however similar studies show up to 60 % of sports horses and around 40 % of leisure horses may be affected. Foals are also particularly at risk of ulcers if they become ill or stressed for any other reason

What signs will a horse with gastric ulcers show?

Horses with ulcers show a wide variety of signs which may be vague and vary hugely from horse to horse with some showing very obvious signs such as colic, and others showing more subtle signs such as:

- Irritability
- Colic
- Weight loss
- Inappetence (loss of appetite/reluctance to eat)
- Sudden onset windsucking/crib biting
- Irritability especially during ridden work/tacking up
- Poor hair coat
- Poor performance

In addition some horses with ulcers also have other conditions such as low grade lameness or back pain, which may complicate recovery unless both are treated.

Diagnosis

Unfortunately due to the variable clinical signs seen, and that the signs can be caused by other diseases, the only way to diagnose gastric ulcers is by gastroscopy. The horse is sedated and a long endoscope is passed into the stomach after the horse has been starved (this allows us to see the lining of the stomach without food obscuring the view).

Treatment

Medical Treatment is generally with omeprazole which stops the stomach from producing too much acid – there are special formulations in horses that have been shown to be safe and effective when given once daily. Horses with ulcers in the glandular area of the stomach may require other medications.



Management and Prevention

After suffering from gastric ulcers, horses benefit from some management changes which can help prevent recurrence. Many of these are potentially helpful for stopping horses getting ulcers in the first place.

- Increase forage fed – horses are designed to eat small amounts frequently. In addition allowing them to eat more forage for longer increases the amount of saliva produced which will naturally neutralise any excess acid produce.
- Avoid long periods without any feed as this increases the acid levels in the stomach. In horses with weight issues, where increasing the amount of forage may not be practical, feeding hay or haylage in nets with specially designed small holes may be beneficial, as the forage will last them longer and they will have less time standing without any food. In the wild horses spend up to eighteen hours eating forage, and their digestive system is adapted for this.
- Reduce the amount of starch (cereal) in the diet as this increases acid production, and consider replacing with higher energy forage feeds to allow the horses the same calories in a form that is less likely to aggravate ulcers.
- Try to reduce stress levels – stressed horses have higher levels of corticosteroid which leads to reduced blood supply to the stomach which disrupts the protective lining of the stomach leading to ulceration. Turning horses out as much as possible and allowing interaction with other horses all reduce stress levels.
- Feed some alfalfa in the diet – this has been shown in clinical studies to reduce the occurrence of ulcers in horses. It is thought that this is by buffering the acid in the stomach.
- Reduce exercise intensity during recovery – if your horse is in high level work when the ulcers are diagnosed, then we may suggest a lower level workload whilst they are recovering.
- Turnout as much as possible to allow interaction with other horses and natural grazing.

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