



EQUINE GASTRIC ULCERATION SYNDROME

Numerous studies throughout the world have proven that stomach ulcers in horses are very common. They reportedly affect up to 90% of racehorses in training and 60% of competition horses and a recent study at a pacing stud in NSW revealed that 95% of their horses had stomach ulcers.

The cause of Gastric Ulcers has largely been blamed on long periods without food, especially roughage. Horses are grazing animals; however performance and race horses are often stabled and fed only 2 large feeds a day with low levels of roughage leaving the horses stomach empty for long periods. The stomach acid is continuously secreted and may irritate the stomach lining causing ulcers. So unlike humans, it is not bacteria which causes gastric ulcers but exposure to stomach acid is thought to be a major factor.

Grazing horses are less likely to have gastric ulcers because they are constantly eating without any periods of an empty stomach. When a horse is grazing grass and saliva (which contains bicarbonate) is flowing constantly into the stomach, which buffers the stomach acid and prevents ulcers forming.

Ulcers occur mainly in the non-glandular area of the stomach, along the margo plicatus. The cells in this area are not protected from the stomach acid because they do not secrete mucus or bicarbonate. The severity of the ulcers is related to the duration of exposure to the acid and if they are quite severe they can bleed into the gut causing anaemia and low protein.

Risk factors include stabling your horse for long periods without grazing and feeding two large meals per day. High energy feed, intermittent feeding, intensive exercise, racing and transporting. It is important to remember that horses must continue to eat throughout the day - when the horse is not eating, the stomach is exposed to acid.

Feeding grain increases the secretion of acid but protein can buffer the effect, so it's important to feed grain and protein together. Lucerne chaff is high in protein so feeding it with grain will assist in preventing ulcers.

Not all horses with gastric ulcers will show signs, so many do go undiagnosed, however some of the things to look out for include:

- decreased appetite – your horse may go off his food slightly, not clearing up all of his hard feed and due to decreased appetite his coat may become dull and parts of it may start to fall out.
- Frequently he will become sour in his behaviour towards work and his performance may drop.

- He may colic one or a number of times, grind his teeth, wind suck and may develop diarrhoea.
- If the ulcers are severe and bleeding into the gut, he will have a lower red blood cell count and haemoglobin level.

The best method of diagnosing gastric ulcers is to have a blood test. If it indicates severe ulcers, you can arrange to have them looked at with an endoscope.

Your vet is the best person to advise you on a correct treatment plan. As the founder of Save a Horse Australia, we treat all off the track racehorses and emaciated rescue horses with an oral paste containing omeprazole, called Omaguard by Nature Vet. This drug binds the cells of the stomach lining, which produces the acid, reducing its production. Omaguard is by prescription only, so consult your vet if you think your horse may have ulcers.

Ulcer healing takes 14-28 days, sometimes longer depending on the severity of the ulcers. Your vet will advise you on a treatment plan. It is important to remember that if your horse is healing from ulcers, it is best to spell him from work until they have healed. Stress can prevent and prolong the healing process, so keep him as relaxed as possible.

During treatment decrease grain and increase roughage. Feed smaller meals more frequently and if your horse has severe ulcers you should provide iron and a blood building supplement. At Save a Horse Australia we use a supplement called "Blud".

There are a number of excellent healing herbs available that will help heal mild cases of gastric ulceration and we have used many different herbal plans on our rescue horses with great success. Chamomile, meadowsweet, marshmallow, slippery elm bark, whey powder and liquorice root are all excellent and work well together. We also feed Protexin probiotic and apple cider vinegar which helps restore gut flora and encourages saliva, the natural protection against gastric acidity. (Never feed apple cider vinegar in the same meal with other herbs). Always consult a professional equine herbalist before using any herbal plan on your horse.

As noted earlier, ulcers are very common in horses and we are their biggest enemy due to the management and lifestyle we place upon our equine friends. The most important thing to remember is to make sure your horse has access to plenty of roughage, substituting grass for grassy hay if necessary. If your horse is showing any symptoms call your vet immediately for a check up, blood test and treatment plan.

This article is not a substitute for professional veterinarian advice.

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