



Gastric Ulcers A Performance-reducing Issue for Horses

The Educated Horseman: Health Series



Gastric ulcers are a painful performance-reducing issue in horses of all ages.

As you would expect, the highest percentage of ulcers typically are found in horses that are under high amounts of stress like racehorses. But ulcers are being found in horses that we don't think about as being in high stress situations.

Although most people don't realize it, stall confinement, increased exercise and competition, transport, sporadic feeding, feeding concentrate (grain), fasting and long-term use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and corticosteroids are just some of the factors that can contribute stress for your horse.

An ulcer is defined as an area of damaged and eroded tissue caused by digestive acid that leaves behind a sore in the stomach or beginning parts of the small intestine. The horse's stomach is uniquely designed and will secrete acid even when it is not eating.

Grazing naturally protects the horse's stomach from the acid secretions. The roughage the horse consumes throughout the day absorbs a considerable amount of stomach acid and acts as a source of protection for the stomach when combined with the acid-neutralizing effect of saliva.

As a result, the amount of accumulated stomach acid is reduced while the horse is eating and increased when it is not. Subjecting a horse to a domesticated environment coupled with intense training/competition, hauling and medications increases the likelihood of ulcer development.

The only way to definitively diagnose gastric ulcers is to have your veterinarian examine the stomach directly with an endoscope. Multiple treatment options exist, but since the symptoms of ulcers easily can be confused with other low grade intestinal tract discomfort, it is best to seek a professional diagnosis before treatment.

Management has a huge effect on the development of gastric ulcers and a horse's overall performance. Continual grazing is the best diet option for all horses. When this is not possible, ensure that three-quarters of your horse's diet is roughage fed throughout the day.

Classic outward signs of ulcers are a reflection of the pain stemming from the eroded patch (sores) in the stomach.

The most suggestive signs of an ulcer include:

- Grinding teeth
- Belching noises
- Decreased appetite
- Colic
- Salivation
- Poor coat
- Weight loss
- Irritability
- Poor performance



Adding small amounts of alfalfa hay can buffer accumulated stomach acid. Reduce the amount of concentrate (grain) in your horse's diet. Create a routine when traveling that reduces stress and the amount of time your horse goes without eating.

While management is key to prevention, some horses first may require medical treatment to heal ulcers that already are present. Contact your local veterinarian if you believe your horse's performance is suffering due to gastric ulcers.

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References

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