

Equine Ulcers & Gastrointestinal Disorders

Anyone who loves their horse would never intentionally do anything to harm them. Let alone knowingly or intentionally give him an ulcer. Most of the horse owners I know have spent months if not years carefully planning every step of their horses training, diet, and dreaming of his show career. While in training, you might think... well...a little more grain added to his diet might help him meet the increased energy demands of more challenging work. Then, to protect him from any kind of injury, you decide that he should spend less time outside in the pasture with his friends and more time safely inside in a stall. Then, if everything is going well, as they have been dreaming all along, they will be attending a handful of shows in the months ahead, with the expectation of coming home with ribbons.

They are excited by the prospect of putting their horse's impressive breeding, attitude and skills to the test, with all of his careful training and their conscientious care, they think they have laid a solid foundation for success, then, the unexpected, unthinkable happens – ulcers. For one moment do you think they ever consider the possibility that they may have started a course of action that would be setting their horse up for ulcers?

Over the past decade there has been a wealth of research and information that has been gathered regarding the occurrence of ulcers in horses. It is well recognized that gastric ulcers occur frequently and affect horses of all ages. In normal healthy foals the occurrence rate is 51%, it is 61% for foals who have had any kind of illness. A recent study suggests that of those examined, 58% of show horses and 81% of race horses had ulcers.



Changes in eating behavior and changes in intensity of training are two of the biggest contributors that make a horse more susceptible to developing ulcers. Problems can also begin to arise when you bring a horse into stall confinement and then change his feeding program.

Some people who compete feed large quantities of concentrate type grain feeds or pellets in preparation for competition which can cause more acid in their stomachs.

It is the management of our horses that contributes primarily to equine ulcers. It is not only the way we feed them, but how we train them, trailer them, and even how we may unnaturally confine them to stalls!

Ultimately, a horse needs to be able to live like a horse, no matter what discipline he is engaged in. Horses in the wild do not, for the most part, change their eating behaviors, nor do they do anything physically intense for prolonged periods of time. Yes, they may have bursts of energy when they are running from something or playing, but they do not do that everyday at the same time, in the same way and for the same reasons. They typically spend their time grazing, hanging out and moving around all day with their friends and herd-members at a leisurely unstressed pace.

Nevertheless, it seems possible that a horse that may be used to living in a stall, because he's had to do so for all his life, will do better than a horse suddenly brought in from the pasture and subjected to what's likely to be a radical lifestyle change. Those that reside in a stall from day one may be better at satisfying their natural urge to graze simply by spending more time at the hay net and with little concentrated grain feeds.

In addition, a horse whose routine remains relatively consistent, from day to day, probably isn't going to be as susceptible, or have as many problems with ulcers, or at least he may not have as high a risk as a racehorse, a reining horse, a barrel racing horse, or horses engaged in extensive showing where the normal feeding behavior and patterns are different, and their hay may change depending upon where they are showing, or training.

SUSPECTING ULCERS

Because horses can't really tell us how they feel or where it hurts, it's hard to tell if a horse has ulcers, and if he does, how severe they may be. Diagnosing equine ulcers can be tricky. There are usually subtle signs, however, most are misinterpreted. His attitude may change, he may be a little lethargic or acting skittish, spooky or showing some heightened nervousness. All of the foregoing could be an indication that he is in discomfort and it could be coming from ulcers. Even something as small as a change in performance, where the horse does not seem quite as fluid or polished as normal, could point to ulcers.

Although some of the general signs that follow below may indicate a number of medical conditions, a possibility of ulcers should be considered if your horse exhibits -

Foals:

- Interruption of nursing
- Tooth grinding
- Increased salivation
- Diarrhea and intermittent colic and rolling on to back

Older Horses:

- Poor appetite
- Poor body condition with a rough or dry hair coat
- Weight loss
- Low grade colic
- Soft manure
- Dullness and lethargy
- Change in attitude or performance

The only way to tell for sure if your horse has ulcers is to have him checked by a veterinarian with an endoscope that can get into the horse's stomach, which can be costly. Not only can they see the ulcers but they can also see how severe they may be. There are other diagnostics, which may help ascertain the severity of the ulcers and include fecal occult blood or gastric blood, and abdominal ultrasound. The presence of a very brown gastric reflux fluid may indicate the presence of bleeding ulcers.

ALLOPATHIC TREATMENT

The treatment of ulcers is important because it is essential to use a treatment that will really work, or that will help to prevent ulcers. One of the most useful allopathic treatments of ulcers has been found by many to be Omeprazole. Omeprazole is available under the brand name of Gastroguard for horses. (For people, Omeprazole is available under the trade name Prilosec.) Within the body, Omeprazole works by shutting down some of the stomach cells' ability to produce large quantities of hydrochloric acid, thus giving an equine ulcer time to heal.

In contrast, oral antacids like Maalox and Mylanta work to neu-

tralize stomach acid that already has been produced.

A third type of medication, known as an H2 blocker, competes with the compound histamine, which is naturally secreted by body tissues, so that it cannot stimulate stomach cells to produce acid. H2 blockers include cimetidine (Tagamet), ranitidine (Zantac) and famotidine (Pepcid AC).

THE COST OF ALLOPATHIC TREATMENT

Treating a horse costs between \$40 to \$60 per day, depending upon his size/weight. Therefore, a full 28 day course of allopathic medication, given in paste form two times per day will cost between \$1,120 to \$1,680.

As an alternative there are generic H2 blockers, which cost about \$15 a day or about \$420.00 for a month. They are given in large doses every six to eight hours, depending on the individual case. In the past, one of the problems commonly experienced with H2 blockers was that many horses were being under-dosed. As a result, the medication was not effectively decreasing stomach acidity. In some cases, it was of no use at all.

PREVENTION & ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS

Luckily, there are ways to prevent horses from developing ulcers. Management is key. One of the many preventative measures would be turning out horses as much as possible so they can graze and act like a horse. Limit the amount of concentrated, pelleted or grain type feeds, which not only can cause colic, but also sets the stage for ulcers since they seem to increase

the production of gastrin, the hormone that stimulates acid secretion.

Is there a diet horse owners can use to prevent equine ulcers? The answer is yes, the more natural the better, high quality grass hays, Orchard Grass mix, Timothy, very little, if any, alfalfa, fresh clean water and an herbal supplement product with probiotics and a wide spectrum of plant digestive enzymes like [TUMMY-ZYME](#). We at Earth Song Ranch have also found that if horses are supplemented with 20-30 grams of pure [COLOSTRUM](#) per day while in training or competition along with Tummy-Zyme they seem to do very well, and may even be healing or preventing ulcers in a most natural way, using what Mother Nature had intended.

If your horse is traveling a great deal to compete, he's likely to be subjected to stressful conditions and it might be worth considering using Tummy-Zyme and Colostrum as part of a preventative program. The cost to feed Tummy-Zyme and Colostrum is approximately \$2.50 per day, a lot less costly and more healthy for your horse!

Some horses handle a change in routine perfectly well and show no signs of stress or discomfort. Others react in a range of ways with varying levels of discomfort. It is up to us, the horse owners and caretakers, to do what we can to prevent our horses from getting ulcers in the first place! ♦

DISCLAIMER

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