

Pain in the Gut - Equine Gastric Ulcers

By Dr. Christa Harder

Equine stomach ulcers are a relatively common condition found in many performance horses. Studies have shown that ulcers can occur in up to 37% of leisure horses, 63% of performance horses and 93% of racehorses.

This common condition is caused by an erosion to lining of the horse's stomach due to prolonged exposure to acid. The severity of the condition can be quite variable from mild inflammation of the lining to large areas of ulceration and bleeding.

A horse's stomach has evolved over time to continually produce stomach acid since in natural circumstances a horse is grazing small meals frequently throughout the day. When the horse's stomach is empty for prolonged periods of time the stomach acid can begin to irritate the stomach lining since there is no feed there to neutralize the acid.

Inflammation or ulceration to the stomach lining can cause poor appetite, weight loss or poor condition, poor performance, behavior changes/acting out and mild or recurrent colic.

There are also several risk factors in horses that can lead to an increased likelihood of developing ulcers.

Diet - Since horses are continuously secreting stomach acid, long periods without food to neutralize that acid may cause ulceration. High grain diets may also contribute to ulcer risk by reducing the time spent feeding and increasing gastrin (acid) levels.

Intense exercise - There is a significant correlation between equine training and gastric ulceration. Training/exercise decreases blood flow to the stomach (which helps to remove acid) - while increased pressure in the abdomen during exercise which pushes acid up into the sensitive portion of the stomach.

Physical stress and illness - Gastric ulcers can occur in response to stress. Shock, respiratory disease and trauma may play a role. Transportation and stable confinement are proven risk factors in causing ulcers.

Psychological stress - While psychological stress is difficult to evaluate in horses, stressful conditions may adversely influence feed intake, resulting in periods of increased stomach acidity.

Medication – certain long-term medications can produce detrimental gastric effects, as they may inhibit production of the substances that help to protect the stomach.

Diagnosing gastric ulcers can be difficult and ideally are diagnosed by inserting a 3 meter endoscope (camera) down the esophagus into the stomach and visualizing ulcers or inflammation on the stomach lining. A 3 meter endoscope is not available at most primary care vet clinics therefore another test sometimes used is a fecal test to identify blood in the stool. Unfortunately

this test cannot distinguish whether the blood is being specifically caused by ulcers or if it is a result of various other conditions. Therefore, results from this test need to be very carefully interpreted. In some cases where we have ruled out other conditions, horses are started on treatment for ulcers and their response to therapy is monitored.

Effective medication is also available from your vet, to help treat and reduce the risk of gastric ulcers. Gastroguard® is an oral paste given daily to treat ulcers in horses. The dosage can also be altered by your veterinarian to be used as a preventative treatment as well. Gastroguard is made up of omeprazole that is specifically formulated to inhibit the acid producing cells from producing too much acid leading to gastric ulceration without affecting digestion.

Active stomach ulcers are treated with Gastroguard ® for 28 days then re-assessed. Another product we use is called Pronutrin® which is a natural product fed daily that improves the natural protective barrier of the stomach lining helping to prevent ulcers. There are many other products on the market to combat gastric ulcers but we encourage you critically review their efficacy or discuss them with us before administering.

Prevention is key to developing and also minimizing the severity of gastric ulcers. Preventative measures include: allowing free-choice access to grass or hay, increasing feeding frequency or feeding with slow feed hay nets, limit high grain ration, allowing visual access to other horses when stabled (decrease psychological stress) and addressing other causes of stress and pain such as lameness or dental abnormalities. Preventative treatment with ulcer medications before a known period of stress such as performance or transport will also help minimize the effects of ulcers.

If you suspect your horse may be struggling with stomach ulcers please contact us at the Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic.