

Stomach Ulcer Disease in Horses

Stomach ulcer disease has been shown to be highly prevalent in horses. Activities for horses that are extremely common this time of year, such as recreational showing, have been shown to have the capacity to induce gastric ulcers within 5-7 days. Strenuous exercise and intensive training can definitely increase the likelihood of ulcer development in horses; but the mild stresses of transportation, diet changes, and new surroundings associated with weekend shows or our summertime competitions, can likewise lead to decreasing performance or debilitating ulcer disease in your horse.

A recent study reported the effects of minimal transportation, stall confinement, and light exercise (lunging) on the development of equine gastric ulcer syndrome. The study found that the horses transported in a trailer for as little as four hours, and placed in a minimal training program which included being saddled twice daily and trained on a lunge line for three days had significantly higher incidence of gastric changes consistent with ulcer disease compared with control horses.

This same group of researchers in a follow-up study, placed 15 normal horses with no gastric ulcers in individual stalls and exercised them once daily for seven days. The exercise program consisted of using an automatic exercise training unit for 10 minutes of walking followed at a trot or slow lope for 15-18 minutes. In this group of 15 horses, 11 of the 15 horses developed gastric ulcer disease after only one week.

Equine stomach ulcer disease is caused by many factors, but as just indicated, the attributable factors need not be extreme. The complete causal list of equine gastric ulcer syndrome is quite long. The everyday ulcer dependent list includes the anatomy of the horse's stomach, the level of exercise, their feeding schedule (i.e., allowing the horse intervals of 4-6 hours with an empty stomach), the horse's diet, environmental stress (such as transport and stall confinement), and certain medications, notably the use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agents (NSAIDs).

We can conclude as we review the above list of possible factors, that equine stomach ulcer disease is principally a man-made disease. Studies demonstrate that up to 90 percent of race horses and 60 percent of performance or show horses are affected; therefore, equine gastric ulcer syndrome is a syndrome so commonly found that every horse owner needs a stomach ulcer awareness understanding.

Because the syndrome is largely man made, and because the syndrome affects a great percentage of horses, the equine ulcer solution is horse-owner awareness and horse-owner attention. Treatment and prevention is principally directed at removing offensive [albeit many times seemingly mild] stressors and preventive management of the predisposing factors.

Follow these tips from the American Associate of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) to properly prevent horse's ulcers:

1. Allow free-choice access to grass or hay. Horses are designed to be grazers with a regular intake of roughage.
2. If the horse must be stalled, arrange for the horse to see the horses he socializes with. Consider offering a ball or other object that the horse can enjoy in his stall.
3. Feed the horse more frequently to help buffer the acid in the stomach. (I teach my students to manage feeding schedules so that no horse must go longer than 4-6 hours with an empty stomach).
4. Decrease grains in your horse's diets that are prone to promote the formation of volatile fatty acids. (These are the high carbohydrate grains such as corn and the like. Additionally, I teach and recommend that no more than 4-5 pounds of grain be given per 1000-1250 pound body weight of adult horse at any one meal. This feeding guideline rule means that growing foals or lighter horses cannot tolerate 5 pounds grain per feeding).
5. Medications that decrease stomach acid production are available, but are only necessary in horses showing signs of clinical diseases or when the predisposing factors, such as stress, cannot be removed. (Remember, as little as a four-hour trailer ride is enough stress to precipitate ulcer disease.)

The prevention of ulcer disease is key. Limiting stressful situations along with sound preventive feeding practices, such as free-choice access to grass or hay, is most important. Recognize your horse's absolute requirement for horse-to-horse social interaction. Lastly, ulcer disease is a medical problem that requires your veterinarian's attention; your veterinarian is the first line of preventive and therapeutic council to prevent, diagnose, and treat equine gastric ulcer syndrome in your horse.