

Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome describes the erosion of the horse's stomach lining due to prolonged exposure to the acid produced by the stomach. This condition can vary from an inflamed but intact stomach lining to widespread erosion and bleeding and in severe cases can cause perforation of the stomach which is often fatal. These fatalities most often occur in foals rather than adult horses.

Risk factors.

All the risk factors for equine gastric ulcers have yet to be determined, but some of the more commonly encountered ones are presented below. It is important to note, however, that horses can develop severe ulcers even in the absence of these characteristic risk factors.

Diet

As horses are 'trickle feeders' there is a continuous secretion of acid within the stomach, so prolonged periods without food to neutralise that acid can lead to ulceration. When horses are denied free access to feed or fail to eat, ulcers develop rapidly. Use of concentrated feeds may also contribute to ulcer risk by reducing the time spent feeding and increasing gastrin levels.

Intensive exercise

There is a definite association between equine training and gastric ulceration. Even **non-intensive training** is associated with a high prevalence of stomach ulcers. It has been shown that blood flow to the stomach (which helps to remove acid) decreases with exercise - while increased pressure in the abdomen during exercise pushes acid up into the sensitive portion of the stomach

Physical stress and illness

Gastric ulcers can occur in response to physiological stress. Shock, respiratory disease and traumatic injury may play a role. **Equine transportation and stable confinement are proven risk factors in causing ulcers.**

Psychological stress

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

Medication

Some long-term medications can produce adverse gastric effects, as they may inhibit production of the substances that help to protect the stomach.

How can I tell if my horse has gastric ulcers?

The signs of gastric ulcers can be very difficult to recognise, but may include one or more of the following:

- Poor appetite
- Weight loss
- Poor performance
- Poor condition including dull coat
- Behavioural changes

Mild or recurrent colic

Foals may also show teeth grinding, excess salivation and excessive lying down as well as infrequent nursing and diarrhoea. **Sometimes an owner's instinctive feelings tell them that their horse is acting out of character - or that something's just not quite right. As gastric ulcers are a serious condition, contact your vet as soon as possible if you have any concerns.**

How does a vet diagnose equine gastric ulcers?

While many signs can point to a horse having gastric ulcers, only a vet can diagnose them officially, using a 3 metre endoscope. If your vet thinks that your horse may have gastric ulcers, they can arrange for an endoscopy to be undertaken. It's a relatively simple, painless procedure, in which a thin optical cable is passed into a horse's stomach to check for ulceration.

Can gastric ulcers be easily treated?

Once gastric ulcers develop, changes in feed and stabling alone are usually not sufficient to remedy them. **But a vet can treat gastric ulcers, simply and very effectively – eliminating clinical signs and promoting an environment in which ulcers can heal.** Horses may be able to train and even

Can gastric ulcers be prevented?

You can help to reduce the potential for gastric ulcers developing in your horse by:

- Allowing free-choice access to grass or hay
- Feeding more frequently to help buffer the acid in their stomach
- Cutting down on the use of high carbohydrate diets which may increase the risk of gastric ulceration
- Splitting hay into several smaller hay nets
- Using preventative treatment at times of greatest risk

Allowing access in the stable or visibility to horses that they normally socialise with (a mirror may help here)

Effective medication is also available from your vet, to help reduce the risk of gastric ulcers before a known period of stress - such as transportation - and to help prevent the recurrence of ulcers following treatment.