

Many stressed horses develop ulcers.



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Research on feeding programs and their effects on ulcers in stall-bound horses has shown that animals with a continual source of hay have significantly lower acid levels in their stomachs. This is to be expected as forage consumption stimulates saliva production and saliva helps to protect the upper region of the stomach. Conversely, horses that have had feed withheld for 24 hours have a much greater level of acid in their stomachs. In a study done at the Marion DuPont Scott Equine Medical Center at the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine in Leesburg, Virginia, bleeding ulcers were induced in horses within three to seven days following a feeding regimen of a 24-hour fast followed by a feed followed by another 24-hour fast.

Stress may be also be a factor in the development of ulcers in horses. Weanlings almost always have the opportunity to continually graze at pasture, yet large numbers of weanlings develop ulcers. As studies have shown, many racehorses have ulcers, so there is some concern that training stress may be a contributing factor. Horses in training have very different feeding programs from those allowed the opportunity to graze freely. Most horses in training are confined for a great portion of the day and are fed large grain meals, a practice which increases the production of gastrin, a hormone that stimulates gastric acid. Studies have also shown that horses produce twice as much saliva eating hay as they do eating grain, so grain does not have the beneficial effects of free-choice hay. But, even racehorses provided with a constant supply of hay seem more prone to ulcers. The stressful rigors of training may indeed be a causative factor in the incidence of gastric ulcers in horses.

Obviously, providing horses with the opportunity to free-range graze or, failing that, to have access to free-choice hay would be the best way to keep horses from suffering

the effects of acid buildup in the stomach. This, however, is not always possible, particularly for horses in heavy training or those that are easy keepers. Once these horses develop ulcers and the problems associated with them (poor performance, poor appetite, mild to severe colic, and attitude changes), they can become quite costly to correct.

To definitively diagnose ulcers in a horse, a veterinarian must use an endoscope to view the stomach. The horse should have food withheld for at least six to 10 hours prior to endoscopy to allow the stomach to be viewed in an empty state. Once ulcers have been diagnosed, treatment should begin as soon as possible. Immediacy is important because the problems associated with ulcers can be life-

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threatening. Treating ulcers involves either inhibiting gastric acid secretion or neutralizing the acid produced. Three classes of drugs can be used to inhibit gastric acid secretion: histamine type-2 antagonists such as cimetidine (Tagamet) and ranitidine (Zantac); H⁺/K⁺ATPase inhibitors such as omeprazole (GastroGard); and prostaglandin analogues. These drugs are highly effective in curing gastric ulcers in horses, but they are also expensive. Less expensive versions of these drugs have been marketed as compounded ulcer medications, but research done at the University of California, Davis has shown these to be less effective.

An alternative to suppression of acid production is to neutralize stomach acid and protect the squamous mucosa from exposure to acid. Antacids may be a good preventative tool. Neigh-Lox is a product marketed by Kentucky Performance Products and is available through licensed veterinarians. Neigh-Lox's pelleted form allows it to be fed daily with the normal grain ration. It has been proven to neutralize gastric acid as well as to protect and preserve the stomach lining from continuous overexposure to gastric acid. The acid-neutralizing properties of Neigh-Lox are conferred by dihydroxy-aluminum sodium carbonate and calcium carbonate, while aluminum phosphate serves as a gentle coating agent. The product is safe for use in horses from foals and weanlings to performance horses and breeding stock. Preventative maintenance is considerably less expensive than the drugs used to cure the ulcers once they have occurred. ∞

