



GASTRIC ULCERS IN HORSES

Kay Burt Equine Therapy



HORSE OWNER FACT SHEET #2

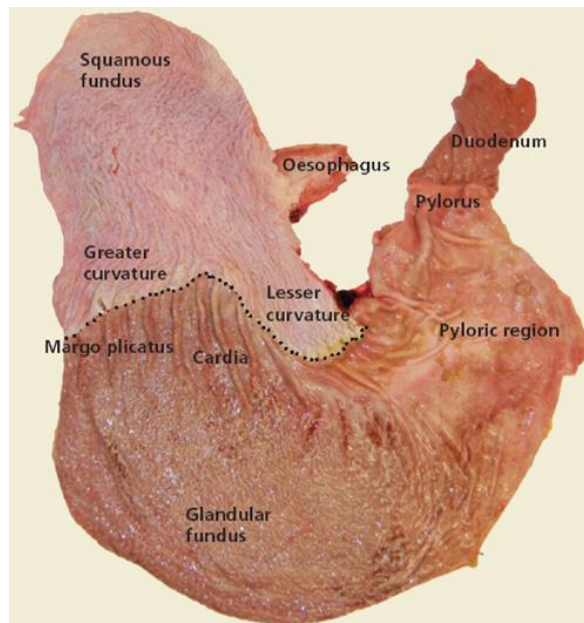
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Does My Horse Have Ulcers?

Some owners only associate gastric ulcers with horses in scenarios where the horse has not received the best care, such as cases of neglect and/or starvation. It was thought for many years that only high competition horses or racehorses suffered from this condition, due to their management and training programmes. More recently veterinarians are coming around to the idea that a higher percentage of leisure horses do in fact suffer from this condition. When you think of a typical ulcer suffering horse, commonly the first image that springs to mind is a stressed horse that finds maintaining weight difficult. Would you be surprised if I told you that most leisure horses that are diagnosed with ulcers range from any condition score between the rescue welfare case you imagine, to well covered, to even obese horses? So, it is very important to bare this in mind and do not be fooled by looking at the horse's weight. Just like the symptoms, the causes of ulcers are different from horse to horse but more recently more anecdotal evidence is showing the most common cause of gastric ulcers is due to underlying pain.

Types of Ulcers



Picture showing the different areas of the equine stomach.

There are two types of gastric ulcer the horse can suffer with. Depending on where in the stomach the ulcerations lay they may be referred to as squamous (non-glandular) or pyloric (glandular). The horse's stomach is divided into two compartments, the top third is lighter in colour and is lined with a squamous mucosa. This part of the stomach is at risk of damage from acid splashing upwards during movement. Ulcers that form in this area occur relatively quickly. The remaining two thirds of the stomach is dark pink in colouration and is protected

by a glandular mucus. This is due to being in direct contact with the acid used for breaking down food in the digestion process. These ulcers form slower compared to the squamous version and are less understood, but commonly seen in horses that fail to produce enough mucus. The reasons for this are still not entirely known but can be linked to one of the following or a combination of; long term phenylbutazone (bute) use, use of other types of drugs that influence the stomach lining, underlying pain, bacterial, coarse feedstuff, ingestion of toxic materials or physiological.

Can you imagine having an open blister or wound that is in constant contact with acid – no wonder horse's show pain behaviours...now imagine being asked to carry a rider and work!

What Are The Symptoms?

On the following page are examples of some of the behavioural traits horses with gastric ulcers show. Some horses can just show one where others may show more. So, if you suspect your horse has any of the below, speak to your vet. Remember horses show pain in similar ways so they may not necessarily have gastric ulcers, but you do need to get to the bottom of the cause.

GASTRIC ULCERS IN HORSES

Symptoms of Gastric Ulcers In Horses

Rushing away when rider sits in the saddle

Aggressive behaviour towards other horses and people

Lack of muscling despite level of work

Picky eating habits

Easily stressed over the smallest change

Episodes of colic

Can present as a hind limb lameness

Rearing when ridden

Dull coat

Fretting behaviour in the field or stable

Bucking or kicking out at the whip

Head tossing, eye rolling and/or teeth grinding

Low energy & lethargic

Rearing when ridden

Increased spookiness

Change in fascial expressions & attitude during transitions

Pacing in the field despite having companions

Excessive sweating, & heating up

Refusing to canter

Poor performance

Feels like they are working with the hand brake still on

Face pulling when asked to go faster or up a pace

Uninterested in their surroundings, switched off appearance

Turning in at you when being lunged, generally avoiding going forward

Box walking or weaving in the stable

Weight Loss

Attitude & behavioural changes when being groomed, tacked up or rugged up

Lack of impulsive and engagement from behind

Muscular tension

Not standing still when being mounted by the rider

Star gazing or a spaced fascial expression

Diagnosing Ulcers

There are faecal blood tests available, but these are not 100% reliable as not all ulcers bleed. You also have the issue of not being able to identify which type of ulcer your horse may be suffering with, which will be needed to prescribe the correct method of treatment. Therefore, the only reliable method of diagnosing is through an endoscopy. For this procedure your horse will need to be stabled overnight and starved for between 10-12 hours prior to the scope. To ensure your horse's stomach is completely empty you must ensure any bedding or scraps of hay are not consumed.

Your veterinarian will sedate your horse and guide the flexible scope down through your horse's nostril into their stomach. Most vet practises will have portable equipment, so this can be done at your yard, to save further stress to your horse by having to travel and stay overnight. Nowadays, longer scopes are available which ensures the attending veterinarian can get a good look all the way down to the bottom of the stomach and near to the duodenum. The degree of ulcerations found are graded from 1-4 depending on the size, depth and colour. Not all ulcers bleed so depending on the number of ulcerations, location and type of ulcers found will determine the treatment offered. As horses can have any combination of ulceration and grading, the treatment and prognosis will differ.

Most insurance companies in the UK will only pay out for the medication claim based on endoscopy results. The cost of diagnosing will differ again depending on the area you live but roughly between £200-300 just for the endoscopy. You will have to add on to that the cost of the sedation, vet's consultation time and call out fee. It is best to have another person to help hold the sedated horse, while you help the vet in holding the scope while they manoeuvre the camera.



Grade 3 ulceration found around the duodenum entrance.



Grade 4 ulcers found.

Treatment Options

In the UK omeprazole is the drug of choice either branded as *Peptizole* or *Gastrogard*. Both options come in a syringe paste similar to wormers. The active ingredient acts as an acid suppressant, which in theory allows the stomach time to heal without the effects of the acid in the stomach. The dose will differ, but most horses will have a minimum of x4 weeks at full dose (x1 whole syringe per day). Depending on how the horse responds to the treatment your vet may suggest continuing for another number of weeks at full dose or start to lower the dose to half a syringe and finally to a quarter. To judge how well your horse has responded most vets will want to visibly see the results so another endoscopy will be required.

More recently, there has been an injectable version of the omeprazole paste to counter the negative effects on the hindgut as seen in some horses. This course of treatment requires x3 separate injections given one week apart and is equivalent to a month's supply of the paste. To avoid localised reaction your veterinarian may inject into your horse's pectoral muscles.



For horses that have glandular ulcers a mucosal protector may be prescribed such as Sucralfate or Cytotec to take alongside the omeprazole. These drugs help coat the lining of the stomach to provide extra protection for the body to heal. Sucrabest comes in tablet or powder form which can be added to feeds. Cytotec comes in tablet form that can be added to and split between feeds or dissolved into a syringe and given straight to the horse. The dosage of both these drugs will depend on the horse's bodyweight. Care should be taken by females handling Cytotec, make sure you read the leaflet enclosed.





Karidox 50ml

Glandular ulcers are more difficult to treat due to their location and direct unknown cause. Some veterinarians are under the belief that this type of ulcer is caused by the helicobacter bacteria as shown in humans; however, this hasn't been proven in horses yet. In some cases, an antibiotic may be prescribed such as Karidox. If the drug route isn't suitable for your horse, there are more holistic chemical-free alternatives such as using herbs like slippery elm and marshmallow root but please seek advice from qualified practitioners alongside guidance from your veterinarian.

Remember... the use of any drug or change in bodily function can have a knock-on effect on the horse's hindgut. You must keep an eye out for any signs of disruption and seek veterinary advice.

Just like any drug procedure care must be taken for those horses with metabolic and endocrine issues.

Management to Prevent Reoccurrence

The cost of treatment can become expensive depending on the severity of the ulcers. A high percentage of horses suffer with reoccurring bouts if the underlying cause is not addressed. Prevention is better than cure. Once a horse has suffered with ulcers they will always be more predisposed to them, so make sure your management is suited to the individual horse.

As a horse owner caring for an ulcer prone horse, extra caution must be taken when changing foods, vaccinating, administering any drug whether that be a routine wormer or for other medical conditions. A lot of owners have reported positive effects of using coating feeds, that turn into mashes, helpful with fussy eaters. This part of the management will be a trial and error scenario; what will work for one horse may not work for another, so you need to play around and see what suits the horse in question. Remember feeds low in starch and sugars are the best options you want to start with.

Before any stressful situation or work give a large handful of chaff to coat the stomach acid before working your horse. Best given when you tack up. Don't allow your horse to go long periods without access to forage, despite weight issues (starving fat horses is not the answer). If you suspect your horse has an underlining pain related issue get it investigated and discuss pain management options with your vet, for as long as your horse has pain they will have

reoccurring ulcers. The use of bute long term has been found to predispose horses to ulcers due to the reduction of mucus production. If your horse has been prescribed a course of bute in their lifetime then you need to be vigilant. Look into alternative pain relief options.

Other areas owners must be conscious of is ensuring tack and rugs fit properly, when travelling, feeds are suitable, and they always have equine company. Changes in routine including herd dynamics and turn out times throughout the year must be considered. The volume of forage provided throughout the day, especially in winter when the availability of grass is limited. Making sure your horse has a little bit left over in the morning so no empty hay nets and bare floors, indicating long periods without food. Yes, an increased hay bill each month is expensive but so is the cost of ulcer treatment! Many ulcer prone horses find haylage too rich so hay is preferable.

Horses can live with ulcers for a long time, so they may have had them before you owned your horse, putting their behaviour down as normal to them. Horses aren't naughty, everything they do is communication, it's up to you to figure what they are trying to say. Although stress hasn't been proven to cause ulcers, if your horse is stressed or unhappy with something in their management/routine then they will not heal and likely to reoccur. Taking an honest hard look at their current yard and routine is vital if you want to help your horse. Sometimes a fresh start at a better suited yard is what saves these horses. Remember horses show similar behaviours when in pain so it may not be the case your horse has ulcers but if you tick more than one of these I would suggest having a chat with your vet.

