

Endoscopic procedure reveals nearly 90 percent of examined racehorses and up to 60 percent of performance horses have gastric ulcers"

Many trainers discuss with their veterinarian or nutritionist that their horses are just not performing, not eating up and just doesn't look right. The problem, pure and simple, could be gastric ulcers. Performance horses used for showing, and even some pleasure-riding horses, may have an incidence ranging from 37 percent to 60 percent. Even more important, this syndrome doesn't affect only the equine athlete. Studies have shown that all horses are at risk, from newborns and yearlings, with occurrence rates of up to 50 percent.

Diagnosing Ulcers

Horses differ from humans because they secrete stomach acid continuously, even when not eating. When horses are unable to access food on a continual basis, such as when grazing, the pH balance of the stomach changes drastically, and gastric juices begin to attack the stomach mucosa. The squamous portion of the horse's stomach, the most common part to be affected, lacks the buffer bicarbonate and protective mucous coating to protect the stomach lining from acid normally secreted during the digestive process.

Clinical signs of ulcers

Adult Horses

- Poor appetite
- Colic
- Decreased performance
- Attitude change
- Poor body condition
- Weight loss
- Dullness

Foals

- Intermittent nursing
- Poor appetite
- Intermittent colic
- Poor body condition
- Diarrhea
- Teeth grinding
- Salivation
- Pot belly
- Rough hair coat

How to confirm Ulcers

There is only one sure way to confirm ulcers, Esophagogastrosocopy, or simply "stomach scoping," is the only means to prove whether ulcers exist or not. It is extremely common that the horses scoped have severe ulceration of the squamous part of the stomach area where 80 percent of the ulcers are found in adult horses.

The severity of stomach ulcers is rated in grades from an inflamed but intact epithelium (Grade 0 ulcer), superficial erosions of the mucosal surface (Grade 1 ulcer) to single superficial erosions of the mucosal surface (Grade 2 ulcer) to multiple actively haemorrhaging hyperaemic (Grade 3 ulcer).

Pre- gastroscopy instructions:

Foals

- Suckling foals not eating solid feed are allowed to nurse until 2-4 hours before endoscopy.
- For foals eating solid feed, withhold feed for 8-12 hours, nursing is permitted until 2-4 hours before endoscopy. The foal's hydration status should be considered.

Adult Horses

- Withhold feed for 8-12 hours, water for 2-4 hours.
- Remove hay and bedding, as horses will eat straw, shavings, sawdust, and their own manure if hungry enough.