

Strategies for Prevention of Gastric Ulcers

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Gastric ulcers are a common source of discomfort or chronic colic episodes in domestic horses. Gastric ulcers can cause behavior changes (i.e. bucking or misbehavior under saddle), abdominal discomfort especially when the girth is tightened, and weight loss. Gastric ulcers can also be associated with discomfort after eating grain meals, as opposed to hay. Some horses are predisposed to developing gastric ulcers based on high-stress travel and competition or race schedules.

Management strategies to reduce the incidence of gastric ulcers include providing smaller frequent meals and allowing your horse to access forage consistently throughout the day (i.e. through grazing or a nibble net). Keeping feed in a horse's stomach helps to buffer the stomach acid. For grain meals, a low starch pelleted feed is ideal, and beet pulp or soaked hay stretcher are other options for low starch meals. Starchy feeds increase the acidity of the stomach environment which can lead to ulcers. Up to a half cup daily of oil (canola or vegetable) added to feed can help supplement calories without adding starch as well. In regard to forage, alfalfa has natural buffering properties to reduce gastric acidity more so than other types of hay.

If you know that your horse is going to have a stressful event in their life such as traveling to a show or moving to a new barn, we recommend that oral omeprazole be given at a preventative dose (one 250 lb dose Gastroguard or one dose Ulcergard once daily) for a few days leading up to and during the stressful event. Keeping your horse on a preventative dose of omeprazole is also recommended if your horse is on NSAID therapy such as Bute (phenylbutazone) or Banamine (flunixin). NSAID medications can lead to ulcers, particularly if used for long periods or at high doses.

Additionally, there is a huge variety of feed supplements that are marketed as preventative for gastric ulcers in horses. The following is information on a few products we are familiar with and recommend to clients. The Smartpak Smartgut supplement contains calcium, magnesium, silica, prebiotic, and probiotic. The calcium and magnesium work to buffer stomach acid. Smartgut Ultra has increased concentrations of these ingredients plus lecithin, pectin, aloe vera, and sea buckthorn, compared to Smartgut. Lecithin, pectin, aloe vera, and sea buckthorn have conflicting evidence as to whether these ingredients help prevent ulcers individually. However, there is research that supports that Smartgut Ultra can aid in the prevention of recurrence of squamous gastric ulcers. Another option that has research supporting its use as a gastric ulcer preventative is Purina Outlast. The supplement contains a mineral complex of calcium and magnesium that buffers the stomach acid to increase the pH and prevent ulceration. The Outlast product is sold as a supplement and is also included in several of Purina's pelleted equine feeds.

A third product group supported with research is the Assure line by Arenus. Assure Guard targets foregut or stomach health. Assure Plus targets hindgut or colonic health. Assure Guard Gold is the combination of Assure Guard and Assure Plus. Assure Guard and Assure Guard Gold have calcium carbonate that buffers stomach acid to increase the pH. The products also include prebiotic, probiotic, digestive enzymes, yeast, and psyllium. Assure Plus and Assure Guard Gold have a higher concentration (88%) of psyllium which supports hindgut health.

These supplements are a few options to consider, but we are happy to look at ingredients for other products you encounter as well. If you think your horse has gastric ulcers and may require treatment, please contact a veterinarian. The prevention strategies listed here do not constitute treatment if your horse already has gastric ulcers.

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