Gastric Ulcers – FAQ

It’s estimated that up to 100% of racehorses and 63% of performance horses\textsuperscript{1,2} could suffer from gastric ulcers, but many don’t show any clinical signs. The only certain way to check is to examine the horse’s stomach by performing a gastroscopy.

**What causes ulcers?**

Travelling\textsuperscript{3}, competing and training\textsuperscript{4,5} can all increase the risk of gastric ulcers developing.

**How can you tell if your horse is at risk?**

Signs are difficult to spot but they can include poor appetite, impaired performance, poor body condition, change in temperament and colic.

**Can they be treated?**

If a horse is found to be suffering from gastric ulcers an effective oral treatment is available.

What to do if you suspect your horse could have a gastric ulcer.

The only definitive way to diagnose gastric ulcers is with an endoscope. Please call us and we can arrange the procedure.

Equine Gastric Ulcers

What are Equine Gastric Ulcers?

Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome describes the erosion of the lining of the horses stomach due to prolonged exposure acid produced by the stomach. The ulcers vary in severity from mild inflammation of intact stomach lining to extensive bleeding erosions. In extreme cases perforation of the stomach can occur.

How Do Gastric Ulcers Occur?

Horses have evolved to feed continually in order to neutralise the acid secreted continuously into the stomach.

Gastric ulcers occur when the acids and digestive enzymes in normal stomach fluid overpower the protective factors in the stomach lining. This most commonly happens when the horse undergoes prolonged periods of time without food.

Is My Horse Prone To Gastric Ulcers?

Gastric ulceration can affect ANY horse - from children’s ponies to racehorses. It is a common and serious condition.

Studies have indicated that gastric ulcers occur in up to:

- 37% of leisure horses
- 63% of performance horses
- 93% of racehorses
Foals are particularly at risk with around 50% developing ulcers, particularly within the first few months of life.

**Risk Factors**

The following lists some of the most commonly encountered risk factors but is by no means exhaustive. Horses may develop severe ulcers in the absence of these characteristic risk factors.

**DIET**

Prolonged periods without food can lead to ulceration. This may be due to horses not being fed adequate quantities of forage or due to horses not eating properly through dental abnormalities or disease.

**INTENSIVE EXERCISE**

There is a definite association between training and gastric ulceration. Even non intensive training is associated with a high prevalence of stomach ulcers.

**PHYSICAL STRESS AND ILLNESS**

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

**PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS**

This is difficult to evaluate in horses but stressful conditions may adversely affect feed intake thus causing ulceration

**MEDICATION**

Some long term medications can produce adverse gastric effects by inhibiting production of substances naturally produced in the stomach that provide a protective barrier against the acid.

**How Can I Tell If My Horse Has Gastric Ulcers?**

It can be extremely difficult to diagnose gastric ulceration through physical examination alone. Signs that your horse may be suffering from gastric ulcers may include one or more of the following:

- Poor appetite
• Weight loss
• Poor performance
• Poor condition
•Behavioural changes
• Mild or recurrent colic

Foal may also show signs of teeth grinding, excessive salivation and excessive lying down as well as infrequent nursing and diarrhoea.

**Gastric ulcers are a serious condition - please contact us if you have any concerns about your horse - even if you feel that something is just not quite right.**

**How Can I Diagnose Gastric Ulcers?**

Gastric ulcers can only be definitively diagnosed using a very long (3 metre) endoscope. Gastric endoscopy is a relatively simple and painless procedure in which a thin tube is passed into the horses stomach transmitting images onto a television screen in order that the stomach can be visualised to check for ulceration.

**Can Gastric Ulcers Be Treated?**

Gastric ulcers can be treated very effectively with certain medications along with changes in management. Simply adjusting feeding and stabling practices alone are unlikely to remedy ulcers.

**Can Gastric Ulcers Be Prevented?**

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

• Allowing free access to fibre
• Feeding more frequently
• Reducing carbohydrate component of diet
• Using preventative treatments at times of greatest risk

**PLEASE SEEK ADVICE BEFORE MAKING ANY DRAMATIC CHANGES TO YOUR HORSE’S DIET.**