

GASTRIC (STOMACH) ULCERS IN THE HORSE

by Dr. Laura Harris

In the last fifteen years horse owners and equine veterinarians have become increasingly aware of a health problem in horses that is now termed Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS). Definitive diagnosis of this condition is only possible with the availability of fiberoptic equipment that allows veterinarians to visualize the horse's stomach lining. EGUS is relatively widespread in the American horse population.

Signs of Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS) include but are not limited to colic, poor appetite, poor condition or poor haircoat, decreased athletic performance, weight loss and temperament changes. Signs in foals include colic, depression, pot-belly and poor condition, slow growth, grinding teeth and drooling, poor appetite and/or failure to nurse adequately.

Causes of ulcers in the equine stomach include rigorous training schedules with intense or prolonged periods of exercise, stress of transport, illness with use of antibiotics or anti-inflammatory medications, and concentrated high carbohydrate diets fed as large meals. Additionally, foals born to mothers with illness in late pregnancy or with ingestion of anti-inflammatory medication such as Bute or Banamine in late pregnancy may be born with EGUS.

Prevention strategies for EGUS include: 1) Limiting stress during training and transport. 2) Dietary management: decreasing the amount of refined carbohydrates and increasing the consumption of high quality roughage (hay). Continuous pasture grazing is the best strategy when available. 3) Limit the use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications such as phenylbutazone (Bute) and flunixin meglumine (Banamine) and aspirin. 4) Feeding buffering agents such as Tums, Neighlox, Mylanta or Maalox when strategies 1 through 3 are impractical or impossible to achieve.

Once EGUS has been diagnosed in an individual, treatment strategies include decreasing acid production, buffering acid that is produced and coating the stomach to protect and provide pain relief. Medications that decrease stomach acid production include cimetidine (Tagamet), omeprazole (Gastroguard), and ranitidine (Zantac). Buffering agents include Tums, Mylanta, Maalox, and Neighlox. Sucralfate is an oral medication that coats the damaged areas of the stomach selectively.

It is appropriate to consult with the attending veterinarian to choose the most cost effective and medically correct medication or combination of medications to address EGUS and allow the stomach lining to heal completely.