

So you say your horse is giving you an ulcer... what are you giving him???

Spring and summer generally mean two things to those of us in the horse world - foals and shows! While both of these events are exciting and we can't wait for them to get underway, they can also prove to be stressful. Will that first time mare have trouble foaling? Will she foal on time? Will the foal nurse adequately? And how about those horse shows... Most of us rush to the first few only to find that we've forgotten that oh-so-important piece of equipment or that we just weren't quite ready for the weather that we ran into! Whatever spot you're in, our chosen hobby can turn into an instant spike in our blood pressure.

Just as these situations are stress inducing for you, they can be for your horses also. Put yourself in your horse's shoes for a day. Friday evening you miss your normal hour of outside "playtime" to get tossed in the trailer. After being pitched around for an hour or two you finally reach your unknown destination. Then it's off to the beauty parlor (a.k.a. - a shave followed by a cold shower and an hour of getting your mane pulled on). Dinner is two hours late and you're eating in a place that looks nothing like your cozy 12 x 12 at home. You're roused from bed well before the sun comes up to be chased in a circle, ridden for an hour, and then to eat breakfast two hours ahead of schedule. Now add in the blazing sun and more riding then you get all week long and take that "x's 2"(it's a circuit, you know). Who wouldn't get an upset stomach from all of that?

All of these factors can increase your horse's risk of developing stomach ulcers. This is exactly what happens to many performance horses - almost 60% of them in fact. Stomach ulcers are increasingly being recognized as a major problem in adult horses as well as foals -up to 57% of foals have stomach ulcers, particularly in the first several months of life. Even when there are no outwardly obvious signs of these ulcers they can interfere with your horses performance by affecting their appetite, temperament, and training. Just think what that can mean to the growth of your foal or the appearance of your show horse!

Acid is produced in the horse's stomach 24 hours a day as part of their normal digestive process. When too much of that acid is present, ulcers can result. So what are some risk factors?

- *Feeding* - infrequent grazing or reduced hay intake
- *Training* - intense exercise actually increases acid production. Most performance horses go with out feed several hours of each day during training which permits the acid build-up within the stomach, causing more damage.
- *Physical Stress* - Foals that are sick hospitalized, or in pain often get ulcers
- *Changes in Growing Foals* - stomachs of youngsters are still developing and are easily injured by acid and enzymes.
- *Other Factors* - Shipping and extended time in stalls increase stress. Ulcers may also result from use of certain medications in high doses.

So how can you tell if your horse has ulcers? Endoscopy can be used to examine the inside of the stomach, but can be costly. Typical ulcer symptoms may include: *in adults* - attitude change, dullness, poor performance, poor appetite, poor condition, colic, and behavioral changes; *in foals* - diarrhea, poor growth, rough hair coat, pot belly, grinding of teeth, colic, lying on back, excessive salivation, and interrupted nursing. Unfortunately, **only 50% of horses with ulcers show these outward signs** and their owners only are sure of their presence when ulcer treatments have improved the animals attitude, condition, or performance. In fact, by the time that the obvious symptoms appear, stomach ulcers may be advanced and more difficult to treat. Many times owners opt to actually treat for ulcers, rather than to test for them. In these cases, any improvement after treatment with an effective anti-ulcer medicine suggests that the horse has ulcers. Improvement in your animal's condition does

not mean that the ulcer is healed; healing generally requires continued treatment for a period of at least one month - especially when the horse remains in training.

If you suspect that your animal has ulcers, there are a few options. Your goals are to: reduce acid, eliminate symptoms, ensure complete stomach healing, and to prevent recurrence. Stomach acid needs to be controlled at its source to let the lining heal. Treatment recommendations include the following:

- Reduce acidity to allow healing
- Stop exercising the horse unless using medication proven to be effective during training
- Increase access to hay and pasture
- Reduce obvious sources of stress and treat underlying disease

There are several medications that your veterinarian may recommend. Most are somewhat effective in hiding the symptoms of the ulcers, but will not actually treat the ulcer itself. Therefore, when you stop giving the medication, the symptoms will begin again. There is one medication on the market for horses which will not only calm the symptoms of stomach ulcers, but is also labeled to heal the ulcer and to prevent its recurrence.

For more information, please contact the following:

1. call 1-877-427-8764 or visit www.egus.org
2. visit www.gastroguard.com
3. contact your local equine veterinarian