

Equine Ulcers & Gastro Intestinal Disorders – Prevention, Natural

Remedies and Herbs

By Jessica Lynn as Published in Natural Horse Talk 2005

Over the past decade a wealth of research and information has been gathered regarding the occurrence of ulcers in horses, especially performance horses. In the past couple of years, new portable equipment has also become available so veterinarians can perform ulcer diagnostics in the field, eliminating the added stress of transport to a facility.

It is well recognized that gastric ulcers occur frequently and affect horses of all ages. In "normal, healthy" foals the occurrence rate of those examined is 51%; it is 61% for foals who have had any kind of illness. For non-racing show horses, a recent study suggests that 58% of them have ulcers, and for the racehorses 81% have ulcers.

Causes of Equine Ulcers

Ulcers are the result of unnatural management, including feeding practices, and some commonly used pharmaceuticals.

Management:

A horse needs to be able to live like a horse – no matter what he is used for and no matter what discipline he is best at – when he is not being ridden or trained. By nature's design, he needs to graze and move freely and constantly so his digestive system can function. In the wild he has access to a wide variety of fresh and natural vegetation, which changes gradually with territory changes and seasonal changes.

Horses in the wild can exercise freely, letting out bursts of energy when they feel threatened or feel like playing. They find comfort and safety among their herd members, learning socialization skills and becoming established in the pecking order of the herd.

In contrast, the typical domestic horse is confined to a stall with minimum turnout, if any. This works against his natural needs as a herd animal and causes a certain degree of stress. Some domestic horses are never given turnout because owners fear they will hurt themselves or mar their coats or damage their manes and tails, ruining their chances at a blue ribbon or large purse. Confinement also interferes with digestion, prevents needed movement and hoof wear/ stimulation, and causes stress. He is fed at certain times, such as two or three times a day, leaving possible 'empty stomach' time. This allows stomach acids to do damage.

Feeds:

The typical domestic horse is fed concentrated feeds. These are usually fed to increase energy, but he is not able to let excess energy out at will, causing stress. Feed concentrates are often in 'cooked' form, making the digestive system produce extra enzymes and work harder to break down the unnatural

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feed. Feeds typically contain added nutrients – to replace those lost in processing or to add supplemental nutrients – and unnatural nutrient forms are not readily absorbed. Thus the entire system has to work harder (more stress) to utilize what is absorbable and to eliminate what isn't. Feed concentrates contain fillers, binders, preservatives, genetically modified ingredients (corn, soy, and alfalfa are common ones) and other unnatural ingredients, stressing the entire system even more. Hays and other roughage may have been grown on depleted and pesticide/ herbicide–laden soils, may have been genetically modified, and may have had pesticides or herbicides applied to them.

Toxins:

The typical domestic horse gets bombarded with regular toxins such as chemical de–wormers (because parasites flourish in stressed, imbalanced systems), immune–system–altering vaccinations in the name of prevention (the best preventative is supporting good health with natural management practices), and pain relievers (because horses break down easily when not kept naturally).

Horsemanship:

The typical domestic horse is trained unnaturally, with force, pain, intimidation, and mechanical devices being the means to 'control' the horse (mega–stress), rather than using communication in a form the horse understands and accepts. Trailering can also be a source of stress.

On top of that, the typical domestic horse is asked to cart us around and perform maneuvers that they naturally wouldn't perform – at least not everyday at the same time, in the same way and for the same reasons, or for prolonged periods of time, without grabbing a bite to eat, in preparation for some event. Would a wild horse jump endlessly over the same jumps in the same pattern, or spin in small circles over and over again, or go around and around the same barrels or poles time after time?

Is it any wonder these domestic horses are in so much pain? Or that equine ulcers are so common?

Suspecting Ulcers

Although some of the general signs that follow may indicate a number of medical conditions, the possibility of ulcers should be considered if your horse exhibits any of the following:

Foals:

Interruption of nursing, tooth grinding, increased salivation, diarrhea and intermittent colic and rolling onto back.

Mature and Older Horses:

Poor appetite, picky eating habits, poor body condition with a rough or dry hair coat, weight loss, low grade non–specific colic, soft manure, mental dullness and lethargy, back pain, change in attitude or performance.

The only way to tell for sure if your horse has ulcers is to have him checked by a veterinarian with an endoscope that can get into the horse's stomach. However this can be costly, requires an empty stomach, and does not get to other parts of the digestive tract where ulceration could occur. The endoscope reveals the ulcers and their severity only in the first part of the digestive tract. There are other diagnostics, which may help ascertain the severity of the ulcers and include fecal occult blood or gastric blood, and abdominal ultrasound. The presence of a very brown gastric reflux fluid may also indicate the presence of bleeding ulcers.

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Resolving Ulcers

There are many things that can help, in many ways.

- Replace "pain management" with proper equine management. Give your horse the time and place to be a horse. Provide maximum turnout, natural and wholesome foods, equine company, and a lifestyle/discipline he is comfortable with.
- Avoid NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, used for suppressing pain and inflammation). NSAIDs are some of the most routinely used drugs for horses – i.e. phenylbutazone ('bute') and, flunixin meglumine (Banamine®). However, NSAIDs cause side effects in the gastrointestinal tract (stomach ulcers and potentially fatal colitis, an ulcerative condition) and in the kidneys. They also retard healing of damaged gastrointestinal tissue. A recent study has shown that Banamine considerably slows down the intestinal re-sealing and repair process, enabling increased endotoxin absorption (whereas previous studies claimed it reduced the clinical signs of endotoxin absorption).
- Avoid allopathic ulcer drugs, because they interfere with necessary digestion and the natural pH of the digestive system, upsetting the natural protective balance of flora and intestinal bacteria.
- If pain-relief is truly needed, choose an appropriate herb, homeopathic remedy, acupressure/acupuncture, bodywork, etc.
- Minimize stress, drugs, vaccinations, and toxins. Think about where these chemicals go and what they do after they have been through the horse.

Feeding Horses with Ulcers

Is there a diet horse owners can use to help resolve and prevent equine ulcers? The answer is yes...the more natural the better. A more "natural diet" would consist of high quality grass hays such as orchard grass, orchard grass mixes with some alfalfa, timothy, a little oat or natural 3-grain forage hay, and very little green leafy fine-stemmed alfalfa (legume hay).

It is very important to have "fresh clean water" available at all times.

Use of Herbs for Prevention and Healing

Are there herbs that can help to prevent ulcers and/or relieve the pain of ulcers? You bet, and the higher the quality of the herb, the better the results.

The following are some of the most commonly used herbs for supporting the digestive system. They make good choices for ulcers and digestive issues, but each should be used with caution and guidance. Some should only be used in small doses (10 grams or less) per day, and not for long or excessive periods of time for best results.

Fenugreek – Fenugreek will stimulate appetite and soothe most gastric disorders.

Ginger – In Chinese medicine it is used for many stomach ailments and nausea.

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Licorice Root – Has a demulcent action and helps reduce gastric acid secretions is specific for gastric ulceration and gastrointestinal inflammatory conditions.

Marshmallow – For the treatment of any digestive system disorder or gastric ulceration, inflammation and colitis.

Meadowsweet – Specifically used for gastric ulcers especially those that may be caused by drugs; it protects the digestive tract and reduces excess acid.

Chamomile Flowers – For soothing, calming, and relaxing nervous horses, especially those prone to loose manure. Improves digestion, is a natural vaso-dilator, with anti-inflammatory and analgesic actions.

Peppermint/Spearmint – Mint is a stimulant and an anti-spasmodic. For most horses, it is one of the best natural digestive aids available and helps to soothe and relax the digestive tract.

Slippery Elm – Soothes and heals, forming a coating in the digestive tract, for ulceration and colitis. Ideal when blended with live beneficial bacteria/ pro-biotics and bee pollen for digestive or scouring problems. This herb is traditionally used to treat diarrhea, enteritis, colitis, irritation of the stomach, as it soothes, protects and lubricates mucous membranes. Is most often used for the prevention of scouring and treatment of gut ulceration.

Valerian – Ideal for relieving nervous tension, restlessness, stress, anxiety, stomach cramps, and nervous exhaustion..

The use of a combination of herbs known to support and or heal the digestive system should not be undertaken without guidance. Some medicinal herbs are very potent and if the digestive system is compromised the horse may not be able to tolerate or effectively utilize certain herbs. There is the potential that if the herbs are not selected carefully and used in a manner that will help heal, they could in fact cause more harm.

Your equine health care professional should be contacted and a plan to re-establish intestinal health should be undertaken prior to beginning an herbal program so that the horse will be able to absorb and utilize the medicinal herbs in the most effective manner.

Medicinal herbs work best when given for short periods of time, i.e. 3 to 4 weeks, then off for a few weeks; or given for 5 or 6 days, then off one or two days then on for 5 or 6 days, for three to four weeks.

The Role of Digestive Enzymes and Probiotics

Unfortunately, the microflora/ microbial balance in a horse can be upset much faster than it can be restored. The effect may not show up immediately, but a horse's beneficial intestinal bacteria can be destroyed or depleted and the pH of this environment can be altered during times of stress, setting the horse up for ulcers and gastric disturbances.

Without the correct balance of beneficial intestinal bacteria, food passes through the system, is not “fermented” in the way it was intended, and therefore remains undigested. This undigested food passing through the gastro-intestinal tract may lead to situations such as colic, excess stomach acid, ulcers, bloat, or founder, and can increase the possibility of developing feed related allergic conditions.

Over the past several years, Earth Song Ranch has designed, developed, and tested a proprietary blend of specially selected wild crafted and organic herbs, pro-biotics, and equine specific digestive enzymes, along with other ingredients such as Colostrum, for horses with digestive tract upsets and

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ulcers, or suspected ulcer problems.

There are many natural helps if a horse develops ulcers. However, prevention is paramount, and it is up to us as horse caretakers to do what we can to prevent our horses from getting ulcers in the first place!

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