

May 2024 Gastric Ulcers

What is Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome?

Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS) describes the ulceration of the stomach lining following exposure to gastric acid. EGUS can be divided into Equine Squamous Gastric Disease (ESGD) where ulcers are found in the top part of the stomach and Equine Glandular Gastric Disease (EGGD) where ulcers are found in the lower part of the stomach.

The highest prevalence of ESGD occurs in Thoroughbred racehorses with 80-100% affected within 2-3 months of training. 17-58% of show/sports horses and 37-59% of pleasure horses are affected. Endurance horses have an ESGD prevalence of 66-93% during the competitive period. A study in the UK found EGGD in 54% of leisure horses and in 64% of sports horses.

So at least every other horse will have gastric ulcers!



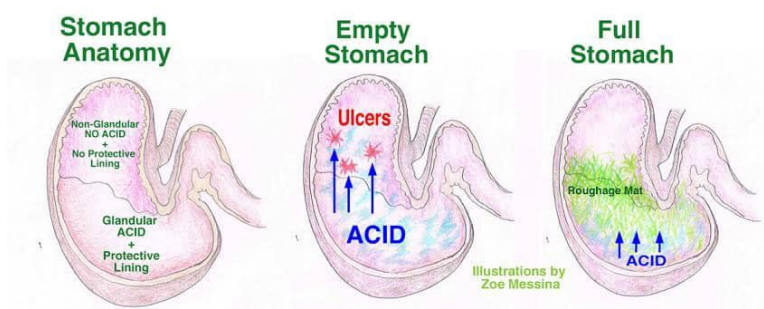
What causes Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome?

Horses have evolved to continually feed and acid is constantly secreted into the stomach, which means prolonged periods without food can lead to ulceration. As mentioned, the horse's stomach is divided into two parts:

the lower (glandular) part secretes acids and is protected by a bicarbonate-rich mucus and the upper part (non-glandular), which lacks this protective layer.

The causes of EGUS are multifactorial but can include:

- Low forage/high concentrate diet
- Periods of starvation
- Intermittent access to water
- Long periods of stabling
- Intense/increased exercise
- Regular/prolonged transport
- Feeding rehydration sachets/pastes regularly
- Increased stress levels including foals at weaning, moving to a new yard/owner
- Orthopaedic pain



What signs might I see if my horse has gastric ulcers?

A wide variety of clinical signs might be present in individual cases and can be very vague ranging from poor appetite, colic, poor body condition, poor performance and changes in attitude and behaviour. It is hard to diagnose EGUS based on clinical signs alone hence we would strongly recommend that EGUS be confirmed by performing gastroscopy as described below.

How do you diagnose EGUS?

Gastroscopy is the only reliable method for definitively identifying gastric ulceration. It involves the horse being starved from the night before and then passing a narrow video endoscope into the stomach, under sedation, to visualise the stomach lining. This is a minimally invasive procedure, which is usually well tolerated.

How can you prevent horses developing ulcers?

Small adjustments to management can help reduce the potential of ulcers developing in your horse.

- Increase pasture turnout.
- Provide good quality, ad lib hay or haylage.
- Feeding more frequently/continuous forage available.
- Reducing the amount of concentrates fed or spilt into small quantities.
- Giving a small fibre-based feed 30 minutes before exercise.
- Reducing stressful situations.

How do you treat a horse with ulcers?

Once ulcers have developed, changes in management alone are usually not enough to remedy the problem. Omeprazole paste given orally is usually recommended as an initial treatment with a gradual reduction to a maintenance dose. This medication must NOT be mixed with feed and must be given directly into the horse's mouth on an empty stomach. It is also advisable to with-hold feed for at least 30 minutes after treatment. Depending on the location of the ulcers some horses may also require additional treatment such as mucosal protectants or dietary supplements such as our Gastric Assist. EGUS is curable but will require long-term management to prevent recurrence. If your horse doesn't respond to the initial oral medications, they may need omeprazole to be given systemically either by intravenous or intramuscular injections.



Before



After Treatment