Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS)
Part One: Symptoms

Are you listening to your Horse?

Is your horse nervous or sometimes too sensitive - does he spook or bolt? Is he distracted, stiff or tense in the back? Is he reluctant to trot or move forward? Is he a picky eater or aggressive around food? Has he just experienced a big life change - like moving to a new barn? Have his herd dynamics changed? Does he take a lot of trailer trips? Has he recently gone into training or as training progresses, does his attitude get worse? Have you given your horse NSAIDS like bute or banamine?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, your horse 
might have ulcers. He might have ulcers even if you didn’t answer yes - ulcer symptoms are numerous and all horses react differently. There are Silent ulcers; half of the horses with diagnosed ulcers show no symptoms externally. Awareness is the key.

Gastric ulcers are a common medical condition in horses and foals. It is estimated that almost 57% of foals and 1/3 of adult horses confined in stalls may have mild ulcers. Up to 60% of performance horses and 93% of racehorses may develop moderate to severe ulcers - the more your horse trots and canters, the greater the chance. And some of these horses will show no external signs.

Statistics affirm that gastric ulcers are a common medical condition. Diagnosing can be done at the vet clinic by scoping, but your intuition might be able to accomplish the same result without the trauma of testing.

The most common symptoms for equine ulcers are reflected in the horse's temperament under saddle; he may be irritable, and reluctant to work.

Symptoms of ulcers when under saddle include:
-Sensitivity to being girthed.
-Mental dullness or attitude changes.
-Poor performance (i.e. tension, stiffness, bucking, kicking.)
-Change of behavior at trot or canter.
-Attitude changes (i.e. aggressive, nervous, or depressed.)
-Behavior changes (grinding teeth, excessive salivation.)
-A sore back or tense flanks.
Symptoms of ulcers seen in the barn include:
-Poor appetite.
-Weight loss and poor body condition.
-Lying down more than normal.
-Acute and recurring colic, often following eating or riding.
-Preferring to eat hay versus grain, or eating grain slowly.
-Intermittent chronic diarrhea.
-Frequent pawing or yawning.
-Tongue chewing, tongue lolling out of mouth.
-Overall tension and discomfort.
-Cribbing, Stall walking.
-Use of NSAIDS

Stressors that may create ulcers:
-Trailer travel.
-Changes in training or working.
-Loss of a pasture mate.
-New environment.
-Stalling or isolation.
-Between meals or any time the stomach is empty.

Symptoms in foals include colic, a pot-bellied appearance, teeth grinding, excessive salivation, and versions of the previous lists. Remember, weaning is an especially stressful time for foals.

Listen to your horse. The rule of thumb is if you think he might have ulcers, then he probably does.

The statistics tell us most horses have ulcers at some point yet there seems to be a resistance in owners and trainers to understand and manage them.

The horse’s digestive system can be a bit delicate when living in a domestic situation and during times of stress ulcers, or at the least a sour stomach can easily occur. Colic remains the number one killer of horses, and the link to ulcers is well documented.

Know you horse and his history. Be aware of small changes, you are the one who knows the most about him and the one who can help the most. Having a horse with ulcers isn’t
a sign of bad ownership; it is something that happens naturally and with some education -we can help our horses manage them. I think it is a more pro-active choice for a horse owner to embrace the possibility your horse sometimes has ulcers and be ready to respond helpfully and even prevent them. Are you listening to your horse?

Note: I am not a veterinarian or an equine nutritionist. I’m an equine professional with a commitment to doing the very best I can for horses. I’ve spent several years learning all I can about Equine ulcers, to help my horses –as well as the horses and riders I train.

It is my goal through this series of articles to introduce the basics of Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS) for horse owners in an understandable and accessible way -even if you haven’t been to vet school. I hope to inspire some enthusiasm in the management of this very common and under-treated syndrome -because our horses depend on us.

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