



# FACTSHEET

Gastric ulcers in a horse's stomach are caused by erosion of the stomach lining, the severity of which can vary from an inflamed but intact stomach wall, through to widespread erosion and bleeding.

## Why Do Horses Suffer?

Horses in the wild would spend the majority of their day grazing, therefore reducing the build up of acid as their stomach has an almost constant trickle of food to digest. Modern day horses that are stabled for long periods often only have limited access to forage, and instead receive high concentrate feeds which leads to increased gastric acidity and risk of ulcers.

## What are Equine Gastric Ulcers?

There are two types of gastric ulcer:

- 1) **Squamous Ulceration:** The upper region of the stomach is covered by squamous epithelium and ulcers occur here due to excessive exposure to stomach acid. Many ulcers develop near the oesophagus
- 2) **Glandular Ulceration:** The lower portion of the stomach produces an alkaline mucus lining to protect itself from being eroded. When this mucus layer is compromised, for example as a side-effect from a medication, or stress, acid erosion to the stomach wall can occur.

## What are the Symptoms?

Not all of the risk factors for equine gastric ulcers have been determined, but there are some we know are common causes listed below. It is important to mention that some horses can develop ulcers without being affected by any of these characteristic risk factors.

- 1) **Diet:** Prolonged periods without food to neutralise the continuous secretion of acid can lead to ulceration. Saliva can help neutralise gastric acid, but horses fed on high-concentrate diets don't have to chew their food as thoroughly, meaning less neutralising saliva is produced and the horse is at higher ulcer risk.
- 2) **Hard exercise:** The lining of the upper squamous part of the stomach is not normally in contact with the acidic juices, but when a horse that is fed on a low-forage diet is exercised, this stomach acid can splash on to the upper lining, increasing the chance of ulceration.

- 3) **Stress & Illness:** Both stress and illness reduce blood flow to the horses' stomach, which weakens the mucosal defence against stomach acid. Moving to a new yard, travelling to a show or changing your horses' management can all increase your horses' risk of ulcers, particularly if the horse is of a "stressful" disposition.
- 4) **Medication:** Some long-term medications can reduce the production of the substances that help to protect the stomach, putting these horses at higher risk of developing ulcers.

### **Diagnosis**

Recognising whether your horse has ulcers can be really hard, as some horses will exhibit lots of tell-tale signs, whereas others will not show any. The most commonly seen symptoms are detailed below:

- <sup>35</sup>/<sub>17</sub> Changes in behaviour - "cold-backed" when girthing, bucking when ridden, general lethargy or grumpiness
- <sup>35</sup>/<sub>17</sub> Poor performance
- <sup>35</sup>/<sub>17</sub> Loss of appetite – Not always keen to "finish-up" hard feed
- <sup>35</sup>/<sub>17</sub> Weight Loss
- <sup>35</sup>/<sub>17</sub> Poor condition
- <sup>35</sup>/<sub>17</sub> Windsucking
- <sup>35</sup>/<sub>17</sub> Low-grade, recurrent colic

The only definitive answer as to whether your horse has ulcers is to have your horse gastroscoped, a procedure that Westover are fully equipped to carry out for you. This involves passing an optical cable into your horses' stomach so we can look at their stomach lining on a TV screen! The severity of ulcers are graded from 0-4, and after establishing how significant your horses' ulcers are we can come up with a treatment plan incorporating medication and management to get your horse back to full health.

### **Treatment and Prevention**

The only licensed equine product in the UK to treat gastric ulcers is Omeprazole, which is an oral medication we usually prescribe for a minimum of 4 weeks. It works by inhibiting acid production which gives your horses' stomach time to heal. There are a number of management changes to help treat and prevent equine gastric ulcers, from increasing your horses' time at pasture to cutting down on the use of high-carbohydrate feed, and our vets can help you come up with a tailored plan once they've met your horse.

**If you have any queries or concerns with regards to Equine Gastric Ulcers, then please call the surgery to discuss.**

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