

Ask A Vet: Reduce Your Horse's Gastric Ulcer Risk

Sunday, August 25, 2013

Dear Dr. Weldys,

I am having a problem keeping weight on my horse. He has been treated for parasites and his teeth have been recently floated. He eats hay but won't clean up his grain. I have tried several different brands of quality feed to no avail. He has had two recent bouts of mild colic that resolved uneventfully. What could be the cause?

-Wasting away in Wolcottville

Dear Reader,

Have your veterinarian examine your horse and get a diagnosis. Gastric ulcers are a likely cause of your horse's problem. You may need to medicate him to heal the ulcers that erode the lining of the stomach and change your management practices.

Ulcers are a man-made disease, affecting up to 90 percent of racehorses and 60 percent of show horses. Stall confinement alone can lead to the development of ulcers. A horse's feeding schedule also can be a factor. When horses are fed just twice a day, the stomach is subjected to a prolonged period without feed to neutralize its naturally produced acid. In addition, high-grain diets produce volatile fatty acids that can also contribute to the development of ulcers.

Stress, both environmental and physical, can increase the likelihood of ulcers, as can hauling, training and mixing groups of horses. Strenuous exercise can decrease the emptying of the stomach and the blood flow to the stomach, thus contributing to the problem.

The treatment and prevention of gastric ulcers is directed at removing these predisposing factors, thus decreasing acid production within the horse's stomach. Follow these tips from the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) to properly treat your horse's ulcers:

1. Allow free-choice access to grass or hay. Horses are designed to be grazers with a regular intake of roughage.
2. If the horse must be stalled, arrange for the horse to see the horses he socializes with. Consider offering a ball or other object that the horse can enjoy in his stall.

3. Feed the horse more frequently to help buffer the acid in the stomach.
4. Decrease grains that form volatile fatty acids.
5. Medications that decrease acid production are available, but are only necessary in horses showing signs of clinical disease or when the predisposing factors, such as stress, cannot be removed.

The prevention of ulcers is the key. Limiting stressful situations along with frequent feeding or free-choice access to grass or hay is imperative. Neutralizing the production of stomach acid is nature's best antacid. For more information about gastric ulcers, ask your equine veterinarian for the "Equine Gastric Ulcers" brochure provided by the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) in association with Nutrena, an AAEP Educational Partner.

Treatment of gastric ulcers often results in resolution of frequent bouts of colic that the ulcers often cause. Chronic weight loss and the numerous problems associated with poor appetite are also resolved when the ulcers are healed and the pain caused by them is eliminated.

-Dr. Jerry Sellon