

Natural Feeding Method Helps Avoid Equine Ulcers

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By
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The statistics are sobering.

Studies have shown that 63% of performance horses and a staggering 93% of racehorses suffer from Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS).

Even young horses in their first few months of life are at risk. Approximately 57% of foals develop stomach ulcers, with the stress of weaning often blamed as a likely cause.

If that's not alarming enough, 75% of veterinarians questioned in a recent study believe that ulcers are actually under-diagnosed. Because the only definitive way to determine if a horse has stomach ulcers is by veterinary exam via endoscope, horses often go undiagnosed when veterinarians don't have access to such equipment.

Chronic ulcers may result in weight loss, poor hair coat, and repeated low-grade colic. Before you heave a sigh of relief and think, "Whew, at least my horse isn't showing those symptoms," it's important to realize that signs of ulcers can be subtle.

A horse may have a slight change in attitude, seem "grumpy," or have decreased performance for no obvious reason. Eating habits may change and he may show a decreased appetite, usually more towards concentrate, than hay. But the fact remains, some horses with ulcers exhibit no clinical signs.

"Things that make horses most at risk for ulcer disease are sporadic feeding with periods of an empty stomach, or irregular feeding with long periods of no intake, high starch diets, exercise at speed, concurrent illness, especially of a gastrointestinal nature, and use of NSAIDs," notes internal medicine specialist Carol Clark, DVM, Dipl ACVIM, of Peterson & Smith Equine Hospital in Ocala.

Unlike humans, horses produce and secrete stomach acid round-the-clock. This is not a problem when horses graze (or eat hay) most of the day. However, when the stomach is empty, that acid can eat away at the lining, causing painful gastric ulcers, which can impact both the upper (squamous) and the lower (glandular) parts of the stomach.

"The glandular region has a mucous covering to protect itself from the acid. Acid is the main culprit since 90% of ulcers affect the upper portion of the stomach, where there is no protection from acid," explains April Knudson, DVM, equine veterinary services manager at Merial.

"Having food in the stomach is one of the most protective things you can do," adds Knudson, noting that ulcers developed in just a few days in studies where food was withheld. "Horses are meant to be grazing all day long, so they produce and secrete stomach acid all the time."

Making Forage Available

Veterinarians and equine nutritionists agree it's a major mistake not to have forage—pasture, hay, or a combination of the two—available to the horse most of the day. Unfortunately, for great numbers of horses this is reality. Show and racehorses are typically stalled when not being exercised or performing. Many other horses live without access to pasture simply because of climate or stabling options.

Owners often make forage available to stalled horses by hanging a large hay net. While this will slow consumption because the horse has to pull out each bite, a major disadvantage is that the net must be hung high for safety reasons (to avoid getting a foot or leg hung up), but this means the horse is eating in an unnatural position and continually breathing in particles that can lead to respiratory problems.

Some horsemen try to solve the forage issue with large hay bales in paddocks/corrals. Drawbacks include a great amount of waste, as well as the concern about hay getting damp and moldy or mildewed. There's also the concern about parasites and sand colic when horses eat hay off the ground.

When Iowa-based farrier and lifelong horseman Mark Olson considered the pros and cons of feeding forage 24/7, he came up with an ingenious product that eliminated the negatives associated with other methods, while offering a win-win for both horse and owner.

"I saw how much waste there is with hay. That, combined with the issue of having forage in front of horses all the time, is what drove me to solve the problem," says Olson, who designed his prototype for The Natural Feeder (www.TheNaturalFeeder.com) in 2009 and put it on the market in 2010.

He invented a convenient feeder made of sturdy low-density polyethylene that won't chip, break, or shatter in weather extremes and has no sharp edges, bolts or screws horses can get hurt on. The feeder holds an entire bale of hay while a grate "floats" on top of the bale and lowers as the hay is eaten. The horse eats slowly at a natural level with his head lowered, pulling bites of hay out through the grate's long oval-shaped openings. Olson designed three sizes of grates (each feeder comes with two), depending on the size of the horse's muzzle and the type of hay being fed, from fine and leafy to thick and stemmy.

The grate system allows continuous, but restricted, feeding and eliminates horses eating off the ground where they can ingest dirt, sand and debris, which can create inflammation and impaction in the digestive tract.

"It's a simple idea that works very well," notes Olson. "It totally eliminates wasted hay while extending the time horses can eat. Horses are very content utilizing the feeder once they figure out they can eat and come back and hay is still available."

"I've always fed my horses grass hay 24/7 because I knew it was important to have forage available at all times, but there was a great deal of waste. The horses would shovel the hay on the ground and use it for a bed, or worse," says Wylleen May, a television executive in Los Angeles, who has a large breeding herd of Gypsy Vanner horses in the U.S. and in England.

"These feeders have totally eliminated that problem, plus they allow me to replicate a horse being out on pasture because they mimic grazing. They're also incredibly sturdy; I'm still using The Natural Feeders I bought three years ago," adds May, whose SD Farm in Acton, California, has no grass because of its high desert location.

"The horses regulate how much they eat and there's not the food anxiety or drama I used to have with stalled horses being fed twice hay a day. Another health advantage for people living where sand colic is a concern is that these feeders keep horses from ingesting sand."