

## Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS)

### Part Three: Treatment and Training.

#### **How can I help my horse?**

The more I learn and understand about equine digestion, structure and temperament, the more I believe this fundamental point; horses were never designed for domestic ownership. The second, and equally fundamental; they do want partnership with us. I don't see horses who want to be returned to the wild. The horses I know –even rescue animals, choose to be here and want to work with us. I choose to balance these contrary fundamentals is by making their well-being my first commitment -period.

#### **Treatment:**

The first rule of riding is to do no harm. If your horse has a personality change or if he is working differently -slow down and look for a physical cause. Your first line of diagnosis is always your knowledge of your own horse. It is up to you to be so familiar with your horse that tiny changes are obvious. Listen to your horse.

Diagnosing ulcers is done in a variety of ways. Your vet can scope your horse. This involves a fasting period to clear the stomach of food and a mild sedative for the actual procedure. The test is definitive, but also stressful. Ulcers can start to form in as little as 4 hours. Some say that the stress of fasting and testing can cause ulcers in a sensitive horse.

A holistic vet can check ulcer pressure points and diagnose that way. Finally, if you have concerns you might consider giving your horse some antacid (Tums or Mylanta) and if he improves in a short time, you will have an answer.

Most ulcers need therapy to heal, like pharmacological acid suppression. Gastrogard and Ulcergard are the only [the only FDA-approved treatment for equine ulcers](#); your vet is required to recommend them. The active ingredient Omeprazole prevents the production of stomach acid. Sadly the equine form of this treatment is costly at about \$1000.00 for the first 30 days. My fear is that many horse owners choose to deny the existence of ulcers because of the cost of that particular treatment. But there are many other, less expensive sources for that drug and alternative online sources exist. Do some research online and read some forums. People are getting good results with other, less expensive options.

Other drug alternatives include antacids containing calcium and magnesium. Ranitidine is the generic drug most commonly used. It is very affordable but requires several doses a day to heal ulcers. It was the most common treatment before the development of Omeprazole and it still works.

A note of caution: There is some research that shows buffering stomach acid, or

decreasing production of stomach acid may be effective in the stomach but produce an imbalance in the hindgut resulting in colonic ulcers. Use caution in the long term, keep a keen eye on your horse.

The last decade has seen an explosion of available supplements for digestive support and managing ulcer-prone horses, including amino acids, vitamins and minerals, natural soothers like aloe, lecithin, and kaolin clay. Chinese herbs can be effective, as is the use of pre-biotics and pro-biotics. It can be a bit overwhelming to begin, but don't get overwhelmed. It starts to make sense fairly quickly. Each individual horse responds differently so some initial experimentation might be needed.

Remember, if you are giving NSAIDS like Phenylbutazone (bute) or Banamine, give ulcer support at the same time. These drugs decrease prostaglandin production which means a decrease in the protective mucous lining.

### **Training:**

It stands to reason that if the stress of training can be a cause of ulcers in horses, then better training methods can be an aid for a happy, healthy horse.

Good leadership calms a horse. Riding lessons can help a rider build confidence, find better balance with proper body position and generally make riding more comfortable for the horse. Consider finding a riding instructor who trains with the health, strength, and well-being of your horse as the top concern.

Vary your training schedule by switching up easy days and harder days, followed up by rest. Be consistently patient and kind in your riding, but also spontaneous. Laugh more in the saddle, complain less. Continue to ask for more from your horse so the work remains interesting to both of you. Don't drill endlessly, always reward generously. Remember a snack while tacking up so his stomach isn't empty. Make riding a pleasant, stress relieving time.

I have had success with easy behavior modification. If there is a situation that causes stress with your horse, alter the routine. One of my horses is very girthy. The grooming is a happy time, but once the saddle comes out, she gets uncomfortable. I change the tacking routine, but taking time to scratch her especially itchy ears half way through girthing and break the mental connection between tack and ulcer pain. When we find a pattern of negative anticipation and use positive training methods to alter it, stress is released.

If you are planning an event like a show or hauling to a clinic or trail ride, consider an ulcer supplement to help your horse cope with the stress of a change. When I move or sell a horse, I begin the supplement a week or two before the move and send the

supplement along with the horse to continue with once they arrive at the new location.

No riding discipline is stress-free, not even trail riding. Our goal as riders should be to train our chosen discipline with our horse's strength, comfort and instinct in mind. It is always more about the quality of communication than discipline.

Finally, in my opinion, a combination of natural horsemanship and classical dressage are a positive, healthy riding discipline for any horse and rider, with any style of tack. Natural Horsemanship is simply speaking the language of the horse and herd. Any partnership is based in clean communication and it is our job to speak *their* language.

Beginning dressage trains a cue to relax on a long rein, stretching to a grazing-like position. Imagine how valuable a cue to relax would be for any horse.

The fundamental dressage lessons are designed to make a horse strong, supple and responsive; great skills to settle a young horse, lengthen the riding career of a mid-life horse, and keep older horses strong, sound and happy longer. The goal of a good dressage ride is to be a sort of mounted massage with the horse becoming relaxed, balanced and strong by the end of the hour.

Regardless of your riding discipline, I really encourage you to become educated about EGUS and implement this knowledge into your daily barn routine. At the very least, by understanding the internal workings of our horse's digestive system we can mitigate sour stomachs and make for more pleasant rides for both horse and rider.

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.

Anna Blake, Infinity Farm, Peyton, Colorado

[www.AnnaBlakeTraining.com](http://www.AnnaBlakeTraining.com)

A few sources: I encourage an online education to get the full range of opinion and options. These are good starting places.

[http://www.equisearch.com/horses\\_care/health/illnesses\\_injuries/eqhorseulc217/](http://www.equisearch.com/horses_care/health/illnesses_injuries/eqhorseulc217/)

<http://americashorsedaily.com/download-stomach-ulcers-in-horses/>

<http://www.equinepi.com/faq/ulcers.html>

<http://www.gettyequinenutrition.com/>

<http://www.holistichorse.com/>

<http://blog.smartpakequine.com/2011/05/gastric-ulcers-webinar/>

[http://www.lunatunesfreestyles.com/horse\\_ulcers.htm](http://www.lunatunesfreestyles.com/horse_ulcers.htm)

<http://www.equinechronicle.com/health/equine-care/for-2nd-year-equine-stomach-ulcer-prevalence-remains-at-60.html>

<http://annablakeblog.wordpress.com/2011/06/03/equine-gastric-ulcers-and-sage/>