

Feeding to Reduce Ulcer Risk

Horses are predisposed to gastric ulcers, due to a region of their stomach that continuously produces acid for digestion, irrespective of whether or not there are contents in the stomach. This acid can attack unprotected regions of the stomach, and begins the creation of ulcers. Saliva can help to 'buffer' this acid, however, this is only produced when food is present or a chewing action occurs.

Some of the identified risk factors for ulcers are; heavy training, stress, stable confinement, pain, high concentrate diets, and an empty stomach which can occur through feeding only twice a day.

It is important to design a feeding regime that creates a less 'intermittent' feeding environment. In this way, the stomach has contents continually and saliva is consistently produced. High concentrate diets, can result in the production of volatile fatty acids (VFA's), which also cause damage to the unprotected part of the stomach.

Feeding strategies to reduce the risk:

- Ensure the stomach is not empty for more than 4-6 hours.
- Feed more frequently than twice a day or leave enough hay that the horse can constantly 'graze' even if in stable/yard. For the 'fatties', try a slow feeder — make it hard for them to get the food, to help enable 'trickle' feeding.
- Minimum of 1- 1.5kg/100kg of body weight of hay
- When feeding grain, add some Lucerne hay at same time. The calcium and protein in the hay assists to keep the pH level in the stomach more constant.
- Probiotics may be useful
- Feed concentrates at as low level as practical. No more than 0.5kg/kg of body weight of grain or grain mixes in each feed.

The above may help to assist feeding to reduce the risk of ulcers. IF you suspect your horse may have an ulcer problem, this requires veterinary attention. Correct diagnosis and treatment of existing ulcers is very important to the horses' health. Do not try guess-work with remedies, seek professional help.

Reference:

Videla, R, Andrews FM, (2009) New Perspectives in Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome, *Veterinary Clin Equine*, 25, 283-301