

More frequent feedings and ample, clean water help keep ulcers at bay.

by Win Wolcott

We have come pretty far in the last few months in organizing a management plan that will result in a healthier horse and save us money at the same time. This month we are going to talk about ulcers and how to limit your horse's risk of getting them.

Many horses today suffer from ulcers. Once your horse has them, you have no choice but to pursue treatment that is both time consuming and expensive. While there can be a number of contributors to the formation of ulcers, there are a few things that you can do to mitigate the problem with management. A horse makes stomach acid 24 hours a day, every day. This was a good thing while the horse was evolving, because it ate a little bit very frequently and needed that stomach acid to begin the digestive process. Unfortunately, for today's horse, that is generally not how they get their nutrition. In most cases, a horse is fed two times per 24-hour period. Some horses are only fed once in that same time period. That means that there will be many hours when the horse has nothing in its stomach except the stomach acid that it is constantly producing.

Horses produce a natural buffer to excess stomach acid in the form of saliva. Unlike the constant production of stomach acid, a horse only makes saliva when it chews. Now, a horse can make an amazing amount of saliva per day if they chew often. Typically they make around 12 to 14 gallons. This, and the fairly constant roughage that the wild grazing horse would eat combined to be a natural buffer to the acid that is constantly being made. Take that buffer away and you end up with a large amount of stomach acid present in an empty stomach. This, in turn, can cause an irritation to the stomach lining, which then has the potential to evolve into an ulcer.

So, how do we limit the chances of ulcers developing through management? In several ways. First, follow the outline for a proper diet as outlined in part I of this management plan. Second, break the horse's feeding program into as many individual feedings as is practical for you, the horse owner, to manage. The opportunity to do this is different for every owner. Many can only feed once per day. Those horses are at a significantly higher risk than horses fed more times per day.

If you have pasture available, time turned out to graze can clearly help, as can having hay available between feedings if your horse does not have the opportunity to graze. If your horse does not have pasture available, and you currently feed two times per day, adding an additional feeding at lunch time can be of benefit. In addition, a later night feeding can reduce the number of hours during the overnight period of an empty stomach.

Lastly, be sure that the horse's teeth are in shape to allow normal comfortable chewing of the feed, which, in turn, produces the needed saliva for adequate buffering of stomach acid. You can see the direction we are going here. More roughage-based feedings more often equals a reduced ulcer risk.

Now we come to water. "Clean" water encourages more water consumption. Don't just top up the water bucket or trough every few days. They should be emptied and cleaned on a regular basis to eliminate stagnant water. Horses will drink poor water if they have to, just not as much as they usually will drink if the water available is fresh and clean.

On this note, if you haul to other locations to ride, you are well advised to carry your own water and water buckets. If you are using water from that location fill your own water buckets from a clean source rather than allow your horse to drink from a community trough. This avoids contagious infection from one of its most common potential sources.

At this point, many of you are saying that these are all just common sense practices. You are right, and while many people do some, there are a lot of horse owners who do not consider all of the points made here. I have the greatest respect for veterinarians. That being said, I still don't want to spend any more money with them than absolutely necessary to keep my horses fit and healthy.

Follow these guidelines, and you will keep more money in your pocket, and enjoy a healthier horse at the same time.

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