



Horse Health:

Gastric Ulcers

What are they?

Gastric ulcers are a common and often painful condition in horses, affecting their comfort, behaviour, and performance. Whether your horse is a top-level athlete or a happy hacker, understanding **Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS)** can help you spot the signs early and take steps to prevent or manage it.

Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS) refers to sores or erosions that develop when the horse's stomach lining is damaged by acid. Horses can have ulcers in either the **non-glandular (squamous)** part of the stomach or the **glandular** part. The non-glandular region is more vulnerable because it lacks the protective mechanisms found in the glandular area.

Ulcers can range from mild surface erosions to deep, painful lesions, and while some horses show clear signs of discomfort, others may have no obvious symptoms at all.

What causes them?

The main cause of gastric ulcers is excess stomach acid coming into contact with unprotected areas of the stomach lining.

Several factors contribute to this:

- **Stress** from travel, competition, or changes in environment
- **High-concentrate diets** with insufficient forage
- **Long periods without food**, reducing saliva production (which

buffers stomach acid)

- **Intense exercise**, which can cause acid to splash onto the non-glandular lining
- **Infrequent access to water**
- **Weaning stress** in foals

Even horses used for pleasure riding - not just performance horses - can develop ulcers if their management isn't optimal.

What horses are at risk?

While any horse can develop EGUS, certain groups are more vulnerable:

- **Racehorses** and **competition horses** due to high stress and intense exercise
- Horses that are **stabled for long periods** without access to forage
- Horses fed **high-grain, low-fibre diets**
- Horses with **inconsistent routines**
- **Foals**, especially around weaning
- Horses on long-term **anti-inflammatory medication**, as many of these drugs reduce the stomach lining's defences

If your horse's lifestyle includes **stress**, **limited turnout**, or **irregular feeding**, they may be at increased risk.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of gastric ulcers can vary widely. Some horses show clear signs, while others may appear normal. Common symptoms include:

- Changes in temperament (grumpiness, reluctance to work)
- Poor performance
- Weight loss or difficulty maintaining condition
- Reduced appetite or picky eating

- Colic-like symptoms (especially if mild but persistent)
- “Girthiness”, being “cold-backed”, or other sensitivity when saddling
- Excessive yawning or teeth grinding

If your horse is showing any of these signs, especially in combination, it’s worth discussing with your vet.

How is it diagnosed?

The gold standard for diagnosing EGUS is **gastroscopy**. This involves passing a camera down the horse’s oesophagus into the stomach to visually inspect the lining. The vet can then **grade the ulcers** based on their severity.

Gastroscopy is safe and effective, and it allows for a clear diagnosis and monitoring of treatment progress.

How can it be treated or managed?

Treatment for EGUS involves reducing stomach acid and protecting the stomach lining, alongside management changes to reduce risk factors.

Medication

- **Omeprazole** is the most commonly used drug. It reduces acid production and is typically given for around a month. Only licensed UK veterinary formulations should be used, as unauthorised imported drugs are illegal, less effective, and may be mixed with excipients which are toxic to horses.
- In some cases, **mucosal protectants** may be added.
- Follow-up gastroscopy may be used to monitor healing.

Medication is usually essential to ensure that the stomach lining can fully

heal.

Management Changes

- Increase forage: Provide hay or turnout to encourage saliva production.
- Feed before exercise: A small amount of hay before work can buffer stomach acid.
- Reduce stress: Keep routines consistent and avoid unnecessary changes.
- Ensure constant access to water
- Limit high-concentrate feeds and increase fibre
- If recommended by your vet, consider the use of anti-ulcer probiotics or antacid supplements.

These changes are essential to prevent recurrence and support long-term gut health.

Can it be prevented?

Yes - many cases of EGUS can be prevented with thoughtful management:

- Feed little and often to mimic natural grazing
- Maximise turnout and access to pasture
- Use forage-based diets with minimal concentrates
- Avoid long fasting periods
- Provide hay before exercise
- Minimise stress through consistent routines and gentle handling

Prevention is always better than cure, and small changes can make a big difference.

Gastric ulcers can be painful and disruptive, but with the right care, most horses recover well. If you suspect your horse may be affected, don't hesitate to speak to your vet. Early diagnosis and treatment can prevent long-term issues and help your horse feel and perform their best.

Remember: **happy stomach, happy horse.**