



Equine Gastric Ulceration Syndrome (EGUS).



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TOWNSVILLE VETERINARY CLINIC
AND NORTH QUEENSLAND
SPECIALIST EQUINE SERVICE

32-34 Anne Street
Aitkenvale
QLD 4814

Phone: 07 47790233

Fax: 07 47791661

E-mail:

vet@townsvillevetclinic.com.au

Equine gastric ulceration syndrome (EGUS) reportedly affects up to 90% of horses in race training and 60% of competition horses. The clinical signs of EGUS can be variable but include poor appetite, failure to gain weight, reduced performance and mild colic signs. The cause of EGUS is largely related to the type of diet your horse is fed, however temperament and a stressful environment may play a role in some horses. Highly soluble carbohydrates (sugars) in feed are fermented by bacteria in the stomach resulting in the production of volatile fatty acids (VFAs). These VFAs lower the pH or increase the acidity in the stomach and cause damage to the cells lining the stomach and reduce the layer of protective mucous. If the pH falls low enough cell death can occur resulting in ulceration. As a rule of thumb you should try to limit the amount of concentrate to about 1.5 - 2 kilograms per 500 kg body weight per feed. Feeding more than this amount can increase the risk of stomach ulcers and lead to overgrowth of harmful bacteria in the large intestine as well. Horses that are in full work may have higher energy requirements and researchers recommend feeding higher amounts of grain no more frequently than every 5 hours. This allows stomach acid levels to recover before the next feed. Ensuring adequate amounts of roughage in the diet is also essential, Feeding 2% body weight as roughage helps to 'buffer' the acid levels in the stomach. In addition calcium carbonate containing supplements or roughages such as lucerne help cellular healing and may reduce ulcer formation. Feeding a small biscuit of lucerne hay every 5 hours provides some buffering of stomach acid. If you suspect your horse has stomach ulcers, the only effective way of diagnosing them is by performing an endoscopic examination of the stomach after withholding feed for 24 hours. There are many anti-ulcer treatments available on the market, some of which are better than others. Products containing ranitidine are commonly available and relatively economical. They must be administered 3 times daily, however the absorption of these products from the intestinal tract is variable and the response to therapy can be variable in some horses. More recently products containing omeprazole have become available for horses. Omeprazole containing products are more expensive compared to other anti-ulcer drugs, however they have been shown to be much more effective in treating ulcers and they only need to be given once daily. If you have tried ranitidine containing products and found little improvement in your horse, it may well be worthwhile switching to omeprazole containing products. If you are concerned your horse may have stomach ulcers, try some dietary alterations and discuss treatment options with your veterinarian.