

Herbal Relief for Gastric Ulcers

In recent years, the very high prevalence of gastric ulcers in performance horses has really come to the attention of many horse owners. Studies have shown that up to 90% of racehorses are affected by ulcers, of which 50% are moderate to severe. Other studies have shown that approximately 60% of showjumpers and dressage horses are affected. Indications that your horse could have ulcers include: lacklustre performance, diarrhoea, reduced appetite, weight loss, colic, and changes in temperament. Crib-biting, windsucking and wood-chewing can also be associated with gastric ulcers, as these behaviours increase the production of saliva, which has a buffering effect on gastric acid secretions and gives the horse temporary relief from their abdominal discomfort.

Several studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between the duration and intensity of exercise and the incidence of gastric ulcers, but there are other major factors involved also. Stress is one of these, and this was well illustrated in a study involving horses in only light training, which showed that around 70% of these horses developed ulcers when they were transported to a new yard. This study also showed that ulcers could develop within a mere 7 days. Drugs such as corticosteroids, aspirin and NSAID's (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) are all known to induce ulcers, if they are used excessively or for prolonged periods.

Another major factor is diet. The horse's stomach was naturally developed to digest small and regular intakes of mainly fibrous material – this is in stark contrast to the large quantities of starchy and sugary grain concentrate meal that stabled horses are usually fed two or three times daily. Large quantities of grain can promote the development of gastric ulcers because a stomach full of grain will digest far more rapidly than a stomach full of a more fibrous feed (like grass or hay), resulting in an empty stomach that is left very vulnerable to continuous gastric acid secretions. Seeing as frequent intake of roughage would have a constant buffering effect on gastric acid secretions, its pure common sense that horses prone to ulcers should be allowed free access at all times to good quality roughage, and ideally should have their grain concentrate meals diluted with chaff (preferably Lucerne, or another source of good quality roughage such as beet pulp) and divided into smaller meals to be fed throughout the day. One study examining the effects of different types of hays in relation to ulcers showed that lucerne hay has a particularly protective effect; because it's high protein and calcium content have an excellent buffering effect on stomach acids.

An imbalance of healthy gut flora is also linked to peptic ulcers. It's believed that one bacterial organism in particular, *Helicobacter pylori*, is the culprit as it weakens the mucosal coating that protects the stomach and intestinal walls from damage caused by stomach acids. As probiotics supplements restore the balance

in favour of healthy bacteria, they are frequently recommended for relief of ulcers. Brewer's yeast (nutritional yeast) would also be a very suitable supplement in this instance, as it is a natural prebiotic, which means that although it doesn't contain live cultures as probiotics do, it provides a rich source of the nutrients that enable healthy gut flora to thrive and predominate in the intestinal tract. Other good reasons why Brewer's yeast would be very suitable is, 1) it helps to relieve scouring, 2) it encourages efficient feed conversion (so can help to increase weight), and 3) it is commonly indicated for use during stressful situations as it helps to support the nervous system. (For general interest's sake, probiotic means 'for life', and prebiotic means 'before life' or can also be described as a 'precursor to life').

Antacid treatments (which reduce gastric acidity) are as a rule prescribed by veterinarians for equines diagnosed with ulcers. Research has shown that although these treatments can be temporarily very effective, one negative effect they have is that they alter the normal function and structure of cells lining the digestive tract. This is a major reason why peptic ulcers redevelop again after antacid treatment.

Herbs that will not have the side effects of standard antacid treatments, and that are specifically recommended for the long-term healing of gastric ulcers, include those that will actively help to protect and promote healing of the gastric lining (i.e. are demulcent and anti-inflammatory), reduce stress, are antacid, as well as those that will specifically nourish and encourage the overall health of the digestive system. It's best if these herbs are used together in a blend, as they have a synergistic effect when combined.

Demulcent herbs that are rich in protective mucilage are fenugreek seed (preferably milled or soaked in hot water in order to help release the mucilage), comfrey leaf (which will also greatly speed healing of damaged intestinal tissues as it contains a substance called allantoin which significantly increases the rate of cell multiplication), marshmallow root, slippery elm bark, plantain leaf and liquorice root, although an extracted version of the root called Deglycyrrizinated Liquorice (DGL), which is rich in flavonoids, is usually recommended for treatment of peptic ulcers.

Comfrey leaf, Marshmallow root, standard Liquorice root, Meadowsweet (which is an antacid) and Calendula petals are all anti-inflammatory herbs specifically recommended for treating ulcers. Chamomile flowers is another very suitable anti-inflammatory herb, as it is helpful for relieving scouring besides also being sedative, so helps to reduce stress levels. Vervain is also useful for its stress-relieving properties, as well as for its ability to support and stimulate the liver.

Other highly recommended digestive tonics are Milk Thistle seed and Dandelion, as even though these herbs are not specifics for ulcers, they are recommended in that they will support healthy function of the liver and kidneys and thereby promote their action of eliminating of toxins (which can be as a result of drugs, stress or incorrect diet), and by doing so, will help the horse to recuperate efficiently and improve overall wellness.

BEFORE



AFTER

