

Gastric ulcer FAQs

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GLANDULAR AND NON-GLANDULAR ULCERS?

Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome or EGUS is the overriding term for erosion and ulcers in the equine stomach. However it is now divided into Equine Squamous Gastric Disease (ESGD) or non-glandular ulcers and Equine Glandular Gastric Disease (EGGD), covering ulcers in the glandular (lower) part of the stomach. Current knowledge indicates that ESGD and EGGD are separate diagnoses with different causes, risk factors and response to medical treatment, but they both have similar negative influence on welfare and performance. We have more evidence to support the role of nutrition and management with respect ESGD than EGGD. However, currently it is recommended that the principles for feeding and management are the same for horses with non-glandular and/or glandular ulcers. Many factors may increase the risk of gastric ulceration in the non-glandular part of the stomach, including exercise, but nutrition is one that can be more easily influenced.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT A HORSE IS SUFFERING FROM GASTRIC ULCERS?

As ulcers generally cause low-grade pain, signs – although they can appear vague – often include poor performance, reduced appetite, some weight loss, resistance to girthing, a stary coat and irritable behaviour.

HOW ARE GASTRIC ULCERS DIAGNOSED?

They are diagnosed by a veterinary surgeon, who performs a gastroscopy. This involves inserting a 3m-long endoscope – with a 1cm diameter – into the horse's stomach. This is carried out while the horse is sedated after being fasted for several hours.



MANAGEMENT ADVICE

REDUCING STRESS: Even horses turned out 24/7 can have gastric ulcers, so stress is clearly a contributing factor. Although it is impossible to eliminate all stress, it can be reduced by moving a horse to a quieter part of the yard, turning out with a companion, bringing horses in together and feeding them all at the same time for example.

FOLLOW FEEDING GUIDELINES: General advice for all horses and ponies is to feed no less than 1.5% dry matter of their body weight daily of fibrous matter such as conserved forage. For a 500kg horse, for example, this would be 7.5kg of dry matter or 8.8kg of hay, assuming it is 85% dry matter. In the case of haylage, which is typically 65% dry matter, the horse would need to be fed 11.5kg.

FEED FIBRE: Ad-lib access to conserved forage or forage replacers such as hay, haylage and chopped fibre feed allows a horse to eat little and often, as nature intended. This encourages longer chew time, which in turn leads to an increase in saliva production which, with its bicarbonate, helps to neutralise acidity. Chopped fibres and soaked fibre feeds are ideally suited to older horses with dental issues or for those with RAO (recurrent airway obstruction), formerly known as COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder).

PHOTO: MARK JOHNSTON RACING



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The BETA Feed Assurance mark

for products suitable for horses and ponies prone to gastric ulcers

AN EXPLANATORY GUIDE



Suitable for equines prone to gastric ulcers as part of a balanced diet



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There are several conditions such as laminitis, tying up and colic, where inappropriate nutritional management can be a contributing factor. Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS) is another example of a multi-factorial condition where diet and feeding management are believed to contribute to the problem in some cases. It is a condition that is increasingly effecting a wide variety of breeds and types of horses and is no longer recognised as a problem confined to racehorses.

It is widely accepted that there are particular types of diets and feeds that may increase the risk of EGUS. As the number of horses effected by EGUS has increased, feed companies wanted to highlight the feeds in their ranges that were better suited to horses prone to or at risk from EGUS. However legislative restrictions meant that it was becoming increasingly difficult for feed companies to do so.

Following extensive consultation with the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) the British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) developed this feed assurance scheme to allow feed companies to identify and mark products that are the most suitable for horses prone to EGUS without contravening the current rules and regulations relating to marketing horse feeds. The aim and intention of the scheme is to make it easier for a horse-owner to select a suitable feed for their horse or pony if they are concerned about EGUS.



PHOTO: BAILEYS HORSE FEEDS

WHICH PRODUCTS ARE COVERED BY THE SCHEME?

The scheme only applies to feeds and NOT products marketed as nutritional supplements. This is because the scheme is designed to identify feeds that are suitable to be used as part of a dietary management regime where there is some scientific evidence to support a reduction in EGUS incidence. In addition, supplements by their nature are often perceived to be medicinal and it was imperative that the integrity of the scheme was not compromised by the inclusion of products that could be interpreted as treating or preventing the condition.

For this reason it is also important to note that any feed implying it can or claiming to treat or prevent EGUS would not gain approval under this BETA scheme. This is because unless a company has a special medicinal license (Marketing Authorisation) issued by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, they cannot state or imply that a feed is able to treat or prevent any disease. The process of gaining approval under the BETA scheme requires additional approval from the VMD therefore any products with claims that contravene the rules relating to marketing feeds will be rejected.

Any company can submit their products for approval – there is no requirement to be a BETA member.



PHOTO: MARS HORSECARE UK LTD

OTHER REASONS FEEDS MAY NOT HAVE THE BETA APPROVAL MARK

- There is a cost associated with the BETA approval mark and so some companies may choose not to submit their products even though they would meet the criteria
- Feeds may meet the nutritional criteria but the company is making claims that contravene marketing rules and regulations
- A feed may simply not meet the nutritional criteria of the scheme

WHAT ARE THE NUTRITIONAL CRITERIA OF THE SCHEME?

A review of the research published in peer-reviewed journals was carried out to establish the nutritional criteria for the scheme. This mainly relates to levels of starch and sugar both in the feed itself and the levels of these nutrients that the recommended feeding rates would supply in the total daily diet. The scheme is designed so that feeds intended to meet the nutritional requirements of racehorses and performance horses can be included. This is achieved by setting slightly higher limits of sugar and starch for products marketed as high energy than those intended for leisure horses, but the product must contain less sugar and starch than typical high energy products available on the market.

ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS OF THE SCHEME

In recognition of the fact that EGUS is a multi-factorial condition and to reiterate that a feed that is approved is not a means of treating or preventing EGUS, the following information must be displayed on the packaging of approved products.

Please note: THIS PRODUCT DOES NOT PREVENT, TREAT OR CURE GASTRIC ULCERS. IF YOU SUSPECT YOUR HORSE HAS ULCERS PLEASE CONSULT YOUR VET.

Recent developments have clearly identified two forms of EGUS: Equine Squamous Gastric Disease and Equine Gastric Glandular Disease. Whilst dietary management cannot prevent or cure either form of EGUS, a suitable diet is essential if any medical treatment and management changes are to be effective.

Management advice for horses and ponies prone to or at risk from Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome

- Keep meal sizes small and feed frequently
- Ideally provide conserved forage ad lib, but never less than 1.5% of bodyweight (dry matter) basis
- Increasing forage intake will increase chewing time which will increase saliva production helping to naturally buffer stomach acid
- If appropriate (e.g. not laminitic) provide as much turnout time as possible
- Where possible take measures to reduce stress – if your horse has EGGD it is recommended to give 2 days off a week.
- Adding chopped fibre to each meal may be beneficial for buffering the acid in the stomach
- Ideally provide some fibre before any intense exercise is carried out to help reduce the risk of acid splashing on the non-glandular part of the stomach.
- Make sure water is available at all times
- Avoid feeding straw as the sole forage source



PHOTO: HORSEHAGE