
Competing with gastric ulcers: What you need to know
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With gastric ulcers thought to affect approximately 60% of competition horses (and up to 50% of leisure horses), it's no surprise that we receive lots of questions about gastric ulcers via our Care-Line. With many owners thinking about competing over the summer, we thought it timely to share a few tips on feeding competition horses prone to gastric ulcers.

For more information on causes, risk factors and symptoms download our FREE guide; [Equine Gastric Ulcers: Everything you need to know](#).

Forage

Ideally provide as much forage as your horse will eat, while being mindful of excess waste. Saliva provides a natural buffer to stomach acid but unlike people, horses only produce saliva when they chew. Basing as much of the diet on forage as possible also helps to reduce the reliance on a bucket feed for energy (calories).

-Avoid long periods without forage - in one study, periods of more than 6 hours without forage significantly increased the risk of non-glandular ulcers.

-If your competition horse is prone to weight gain, consider feeding soaked hay. Soaking hay helps to reduce the water-soluble carbohydrate or 'sugar' content and of course, less sugar means fewer calories!

-Provide forage while travelling, ensure your horse has access to forage throughout the journey. Large holed haynets may be more suitable for those that can lose their appetite.

-Consider feeding hay/ haylage in multiple, double-layered, small holed haylage nets to help extend eating time for those on restricted rations. Alternatively, try dividing forage into multiple smaller servings or using 'slow feeders'.

-Total forage intake should not be restricted to less than 1.5% of current bodyweight per day on a dry matter basis. On an as fed basis (the amount you need to weigh out), this equates to approximately 9kg of hay if you intend to feed it dry, 11kg of hay if you intend to soak it before feeding or 11-12kg of haylage for a 500kg horse without grazing.



Low NSC diets

Diets high in non-structural carbohydrate (NSC: starch + water soluble carbohydrate) or âstarch and sugarâ increase the risk of gastric ulcers.

-Choose fibre-based feeds containing low or restricted levels of starch and sugar.

-If your horse needs a high energy (calorie) feed, look for feeds high in oil as opposed to starch.

-Restrict NSC from âbucket feedâ to less than 1g per kilogram bodyweight per meal (<500g per meal for a 500kg horse) and ideally less than 2g per kilogram bodyweight we per day (<1kg per day for a 500kg).

Providing a balanced diet

Feeding the recommended amount of an appropriate compound (or other feed containing added vitamins and minerals) will ensure your horse receives a balanced diet. However, the amount of energy (calories) in your horseâs diet should be adjusted according to their body condition.

Balancers are a great way of supplying vitamins, minerals and amino acids to horses that maintain condition well on reduced rations of feed (good doers in light work may maintain weight easily on forage alone!). Balancers are also ideal if you would prefer to replace compound feeds (mixes and cubes) with fibre-based feeds that do not contain added vitamins and minerals such as [SPILLERS Alfalfa-Pro Fibre](#).



Short chopped fibre

Exercise increases abdominal pressure, causing acid to âsplashâ on to the stomach lining in the non-glandular region where it increases the risk of ulcers forming. Feeding short chopped fibre helps to prevent so called âgastric splashingâ by forming a protective âfibre matâ on top of the contents of the stomach. Current advice is to feed 2 litres of short chopped fibre (by volume - equivalent to 1 Stubbs scoop) in the 30 minutes before exercise.

Itâs also advisable to add short chopped fibre, ideally containing alfalfa, to meals. Feeding short chopped fibre helps to extend eating time (and as a result saliva production) and the high protein and calcium content in alfalfa is thought to help buffer stomach acid.

Electrolyte usage

Electrolyte losses are linked to sweat loss â the more your horse sweats the more electrolytes they lose. Horses sweating regularly are likely to need some form of electrolyte replacement and in the majority of cases, salt (the same salt you put on your chips) is an effective and cost-effective solution. We recommend avoiding electrolyte pastes for those prone to gastric ulcers - in one study, multiple hypertonic electrolyte pastes were seen to significantly increase the number and severity of gastric ulcers. For more advice on feeding electrolytes contact the SPILLERS Care-Line.



Supplementary support

While maximizing forage intake, extending eating time and restricting starch and sugar intake should be your first priorities, supplements or feeds containing added functional ingredients may help to support stomach health. [SPILLERS Ulca Balancer](#) for example contains:

Pectin & lecithin - lecithin is a fatty like substance derived from plants. If you've ever tried your hand at jam making you may be familiar with pectin already! It's a soluble fibre found in fruits and vegetables and is used as a gelling agent in jam. Lecithin and pectin act together and may help to support stomach health by forming a water repellent barrier over the stomach lining.

Maerl (marine derived calcium) - maerl is rich in bioavailable calcium and fed with the aim of helping to maintain a healthy stomach pH.

FOS: FOS is a soluble fibre (the FOS in SPILLERS Ulca Balancer comes from chicory) and although often used as a prebiotic, research has suggested it may have a positive effect on stomach pH.

When choosing a product beware of bold claims - if it sounds too good to be true it probably is! Remember feeds and supplements cannot cure, prevent or treat gastric ulcers. It's also important to choose feeds and supplements that are BETA® NOPS approved.

Naturally Occurring Prohibited Substances (NOPS)

Any competition horse can be tested for prohibited substances at any time so make sure you know the rules about liability. Making sure all feeds and supplements are BETA NOPS approved is a key part of reducing the risk of a positive test, but it doesn't stop there. Did you know that many human foods including tea and coffee, fizzy drinks, cakes, biscuits and sweets may contain naturally occurring prohibited substances (NOPS)? This means that eating or drinking in your horse's stable or feed room could lead to a positive test!

For more advice on feeding horses prone to gastric ulcers contact the SPILLERS Care-Line

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