



What Is Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome?

Equine gastric ulcer syndrome (EGUS) refers to a condition in which ulcers form in the horse's stomach lining. The equine stomach is divided into two regions: squamous and glandular. These two regions are exposed to different factors that can lead to ulceration, each with its own characteristics and management strategies.

- Squamous ulcers occur when stomach acid splashes on the unprotected upper part of the stomach.
- Glandular ulcers form in the lower part of the stomach, which is lined with mucus to protect it from stomach acid. If this mucus barrier is compromised, acid can erode the tissue lining.

These ulcers can cause significant discomfort. EGUS can affect horses of all ages, disciplines, and management systems, though it is particularly common in racehorses and performance horses due to the stress and management practices associated with these populations. Risk factors for gastric ulcers include:

- Stress from training, trailering, exercise, or life changes.
- Extended periods (> 6 hours) without hay or pasture.
- High-starch meals.
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).



Clinical Signs

The clinical signs of EGUS can be subtle and vary between horses, making the condition challenging to diagnose

without veterinary intervention. Some common signs include:

- Changes in eating behavior, such as loss of appetite or reluctance to eat.
- Unexplained weight loss despite normal or increased feeding.
- Signs of colic, such as pawing, rolling, or lying down more than usual.
- Behavioral changes, such as increased irritability, girthiness, or aggression when being tacked up.
- Poor performance or decreased willingness to work.
- Dull coat.
- Teeth grinding.



Diagnosis

Your veterinarian should conduct a thorough physical exam and consider the horse's management history, diet, and any signs of stress or illness. Gastroscopy is the gold standard for diagnosing EGUS and involves passing a flexible endoscope through the horse's nostril and into the stomach to examine the lining. This procedure allows the veterinarian to visually identify the presence, location, and severity of ulcers. In the case of squamous disease, he or she will then assign the ulcers a score of 0 to 4 depending on their severity.



Treatment and Management

The goal of EGUS treatment is to reduce stomach acid production, promote healing of the ulcers, and address underlying causes such as stress or diet. The key components of managing EGUS include:

- **Medication:** Commonly prescribed

medications include omeprazole, ranitidine, and sucralfate. Follow your veterinarian's dosing and administration instructions carefully, as the timing and combination of medications can impact their efficacy.

- **Dietary management:** Feed your horse a forage-based diet. Grass and hay help stimulate saliva production, which neutralizes stomach acid. Consider adding alfalfa to your horse's diet, which helps buffer stomach acid. Avoid long periods of fasting, and offer smaller, more frequent meals.
- **Stress management:** Reduce stressors in your horse's environment. This can involve improving his living environment, reducing training intensity, providing sufficient turnout, limiting changes in his routine, and minimizing transport or competition stress.

Treatment recommendations vary depending on the affected region of the stomach. Squamous ulcers are generally treated with omeprazole. Long-term dietary management, with a focus on continuous access to forage, is key in preventing recurrence. Glandular ulcers can be more difficult to treat and might require a combination of medications and careful management of stress, exercise, and diet.



When to Call Your Vet

- Your horse's gastric ulcer signs do not improve with medication and management changes.
- EGUS signs return post-treatment.
- Your horse shows signs of colic, inappetence, weight loss, or other issues.
- You have questions about your horse's diet, management, or routine.