

Identifying and Managing Stress in the Equine Athlete

All great athletes are subject to stress, and the horse is no exception. The inability to identify and manage stress is detrimental to athletic performance. Here, we identify a few of the common causes of stress and share our game plan for management of the most common medical issue related to equine stress—gastric ulcers.

In the equine athlete, stress often manifests itself in the form of anxiety. It's the emotional response to situations or events that make a horse uncomfortable and nervous, thus anxious. For a performance horse, these environmental situations can be training, travel, changes in routine and athletic competition.

Young horses are usually more susceptible to environmental stresses simply because they're experiencing so many new situations. Through trial and error, you can generally work your way through those stresses as horse become accustomed to those situations.

While changes like those listed above are easy to see—and hopefully rectify, performance unsoundness also plays a significant role in anxiety. While not obviously lame, we notice that the equine athlete is not at their best based on their performance, response and overall attitude during competition.

Anxiety in older, seasoned horses is usually one of the first signs of an undetermined problem. This is especially true with the “war horses” and “road warriors” that have been there and done that at a high level. When that changes, it's usually the sign of a problem.

With younger horses, you want to determine if they need help through seasoning to environmental stresses or if training is causing a less than obvious soreness.

In these cases, a medical diagnosis is warranted. For example, take a horse with a sore back. A lameness exam and subsequent radiographs of the thoracic vertebrae show no evidence of boney changes to the back. Yet, on palpation of the horse's topline, we get a reaction to pain.

While further exploration into possible causes for the unsoundness is necessary, it's highly likely that performing under any discomfort either physical, or mental, has led to the development of ulcers, which occur when the pH of the stomach becomes overly acidic.

Ulcers are one of the key components to horses with anxious/nervous tendencies. They are found in more than sixty percent of horses that perform a high degree of exercise and competition. Irritability, poor performance and colic symptoms are all signs of a horse with ulcers. These horses need to be diagnostically gastro-scoped to determine, if they are true ulcer candidates.

Many people take a complicated approach to treating ulcers. For starters, find and eliminate the sources of stress—a lameness or environmental issue. Next, make sure your feeding protocol is not adding to the problem.

The single best management tool for non-glandular ulcers beyond not using the horse is feeding alfalfa.



Hay was actually more damaging than alfalfa and grain. The acid level goes up but the pH goes down, but not because of the diet. It is the lack of buffer that allows for the aggressive factor of the acid to exceed the protective factors of the non-glandular mucosa.

While social media is rich with the current fads in ulcer management or the latest winner's preferred concoction, we believe that Gastrogard®, when administered 30 days as based on body weight, is the superior treatment for ulcers, based on the extensive research in our practice.

Follow-up gastroscopy is necessary after the initial treatment to determine its effectiveness. Some ulcers are so intense that they need to be treated for a longer duration. A maintenance protocol needs to be developed as well, especially if stress factors cannot be eliminated.

Even though horses can't talk, they have the ability to speak to us in many ways—attitude, performance and overall health. It's our job to watch and listen to them closely to identify and manage sources of stress to keep them feeling and performing at their best.

For more information on identifying and managing stress in your equine athlete please visit bveh.com