

# Equine Stomach Ulcers: Study Indicates Even Recreational Horses at Risk

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It is just before dawn in Rolling Hills Estates, California. In a barn nestled among the eucalyptus trees, a bay gelding called Vinny nickers for his morning sweet feed and alfalfa. In less than an hour, his trainer and teenage owner will load him up and head for the Santa Barbara Nationals, where Vinny will be a hot contender in the hunter under saddle and western pleasure classes. While his owner and trainer are confident that Vinny will return home with a few silver trays, they don't realize that it is likely that more than sweet feed and hay will be lurking in his stomach on the trip home. Due to the stress associated with confinement, training, travel and competition, horses like Vinny are at an increased risk of developing stomach ulcers. Even horses that only compete occasionally are at risk.

Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS) causes painful stomach ulceration with signs such as poor attitude, decreased appetite, weight loss, recurrent colic, sub-optimal performance, diarrhea and dull coat. Stomach ulcers were once thought to develop mainly in high-level performance horses. However, a recent study shows this syndrome is much more common and develops more easily than previously believed. The new study, reported in the September 1st issue of the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA)*, indicates that simply transporting your horse to and from one horse show, feeding him twice a day, and giving him light exercise can cause ulcers<sup>1</sup> — much less strenuous than the Olympic-level training or race schedules that most researchers and veterinarians have historically associated with the disease. This study makes it clear that all horse owners should be aware of just how easily ulcers can develop in their animals, even under recreational show conditions. The study was conducted by Dr. Scott McClure, from the College of Veterinary Medicine at Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, in conjunction with Merial Limited, Duluth, Georgia.

Handling and housing were identical for all horses before the study began. Researchers started by examining the stomachs, via endoscopy, of 20 horses group-housed in paddocks and determined they were free from stomach ulcers. The horses were then separated into two groups of 10. One group of 10 horses was trailered for four hours to another site and then individually housed in 12 x 12 foot box stalls bedded with pine shavings. The stalls were in rows separated by a common aisle so the horses could see each other.

The horses were fed and exercised (lunged) twice daily for three days, then hauled back four hours to their original site to simulate transit to and from a show or competitive event. The control group of 10 horses remained in their paddocks for the duration of the study with no change in handling. On day five, Dr. McClure again examined the stomachs of all 20 horses. In order to eliminate any possible bias, Dr. McClure did not

know which group the horses were assigned to for the study. Results showed that an amazing seven out of 10 horses transported and housed in off-site conditions simulating a weekend horseshow event developed stomach ulcers by the fifth day. Moreover, the entire transported group had a higher incidence of thickening (hyperkeratosis) and reddening of the stomach lining than the horses in the control group had. Interestingly, two of the 10 control horses left back at the farm in paddocks also developed low-grade ulcers during this study. Scientists speculate that removing horses from the paddocks changed the social order of the non-transported control group, which might have caused stress and thus contributed to stomach ulcer development.

Why is this study so important? It shows just how easily horses develop stomach ulcers under recreational use conditions, eliminating the perception that stomach ulcers are primarily a disease of racing and other high-level performance horses. It clearly demonstrates that even weekend show horses like Vinny have an increased chance of getting stomach ulcers when hauled to a single horse show or event. This study also raises the question about what can be done to prevent stomach ulcers in your horse, since until recently, there was little one could do to effectively prevent them. But now, stomach ulcers can be effectively prevented by decreasing stomach acid production through a recently introduced product called ULCERGARD<sup>TM</sup> from Merial.

ULCERGARD is the first and only FDA-approved product scientifically proven to prevent stomach ulcers in horses. It is the only medication that stops the problem where it begins — at the level of acid production in the stomach — and the only product vigorously tested and approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Medications that simply attempt to coat the stomach lining or claim to “condition” the digestive tract do not address acid production and therefore do not prevent or treat stomach ulcers. The dispensing of ULCERGARD does not require a diagnosis, so you can just ask your veterinarian for it when you know your horse is exposed to stressful conditions that may cause ulcers. This new study, in combination with previous studies,<sup>2,3</sup> shows how quickly and easily horses can get ulcers and just how common they are. Having an FDA-approved product available gives owners of both recreational and performance horses the ability to proactively prevent ulcers, helping to keep their horses in peak condition and giving them a chance to edge out their competition.

For owners of recreational horses like Vinny, who spend extensive amounts of love, energy, hours and dollars on the best feed, bedding, grooming products and veterinary care... that's comforting news.



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Prevent the Ulcer

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2. Murray MJ, Schusser GF, Pipers FS, Gross SJ. Factors associated with gastric ulcers in thoroughbred racehorses. *Equine Vet J* 1996;28:368-3.  
3. Mitchell, RD. Prevalence of gastric ulcers in hunter/jumper and dressage horses evaluated for poor performance. *Association for Equine Sports Medicine*, September 2001.  
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