

# Probiotics in Horses

By Dr. Laura Taylor, DVM

There is that old saying, “No foot, no horse.” A strong case can also be made for “No gut, no horse.” In the wild, a horse moves up to 15 miles in a day and eats for 18 to 20 hours per day.

A small amount of forage is constantly passing through the digestive tract the majority of the time. In contrast to that, the domestic horse that is used for performance/show/racing has a vastly different lifestyle which includes confinement and restricted, intermittent feeding, low forage/high grain diets and stress from training, trailering and competing. Other stresses to the gastrointestinal system of a horse may include frequent vaccination and the regular use of pharmaceuticals such as antibiotics and non-steroidal anti-inflammatories.

**The horse is a grazing animal designed to chew all day long.** Chewing produces saliva which neutralizes stomach acid, which is constantly being produced; therefore, the horse should never have an empty stomach. Unfortunately, many performance horses are confined in stalls for up to 14 hours per day and much of that time they are not eating anything. This is a classic recipe for the development of EGUS or Equine Gastric Ulcer Disease.

Horses should be fed hay continuously via a slow feeding system or at least every 5 to 6 hours in order to buffer the stomach. Also, the

feeding of high grain diets contributes to the increase in stomach acidity and damage to the stomach lining, setting it up for ulcers. The incidence of gastric ulcers is surprisingly high at between 55% and 90%, with racehorses having the highest amount.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as Phenylbutazone (Bute) and Banamine have been shown to induce stomach ulcers in horses. NSAIDs are commonly used for musculoskeletal pain and to enhance athletic performance. Unfortunately, many horses on NSAIDs are already suffering from gastric ulcers due to other causes such as intermittent feeding and stress from trailering and showing, thus the use of NSAIDs can only worsen a pre-existing ulcer. Antimicrobial drugs or antibiotics certainly have their place in the fight against bacterial infections; however, a side effect of these drugs is a disruption in the normal microflora or population of intestinal bacteria and other beneficial micro-organisms. There are more microorganisms in the intestines than all the cells in the entire body. Gut flora play a significant role in keeping the intestines working properly in their functions of



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