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Gastric Ulcer Study

We would like to extend a thank you to everyone who has participated in our gastric ulcer study. The purpose of the study is to determine the association between competition and stomach ulcer formation. Previous studies have demonstrated that gastric ulcers are common in competition horses, with as many as 90% of performance horses affected. Our question was, "Do gastric ulcers form because of the daily lifestyle of athletic animals or are the ulcers caused by the demands placed on the horse during competition?". These are our preliminary results.

Of the horses we scoped, 23.5% had ulcers before competition. All of these were endurance horses. Post competition, 64.7% of horses had ulcers. In total, 58.8% of horses in the study either developed new ulcers or had a worsening of previous ulcers with competition. These results confirmed our suspicion that in some horses, ulcers are a direct result of the stress of competition.

It is difficult to make recommendations on treating these horses without knowing how the ulcers progress over the competition season. Obviously, treatment of horses that develop gastric ulcers is recommended if the ulcers are causing clinical signs of disease (colic, weight loss, poor performance) or if competition frequency is high, preventing healing of ulcers between events.

Ideally, horses that are prone to ulcer formation should be treated to prevent ulceration during the stress of competition. The problem with this approach is that many disciplines do not allow the use of anti-ulcer medication and will penalize owners whose horses test positive for these drugs. The FEI (regulatory agency for international competition, including Olympic equestrian events) has recently ruled to allow the use of two of the major anti-ulcer drugs, omeprazole (Gastrogard) and ranitidine, in competing horses. This is a huge breakthrough, as the FEI has previously prohibited the use of any medication in their competitors. Hopefully, this will set an example to other regulatory committees, so that the use of these important medications will be allowed by more equine disciplines.

We are still accepting participants for this study. If you are interested in being part of the research project, or would like more information on gastric ulcers, please contact Dr. Becky Frankeny.