

# Alfalfa may buffer gastric ulcers in horses

By EDITH CHENAULT

**A** CHANGE in diet can be good for what ails you — even if you are a horse.

One example is good alfalfa hay. Texas A&M University research shows that feeding alfalfa to horses that have the potential to be high performers either prevented or was therapeutic in treating stomach ulcers.

“Something in alfalfa hay tends to

## Key Points

- Alfalfa helps control stomach ulcers in horses.
- Horses can heal when provided less acidic diets.
- For now, specialist suggests feeding alfalfa after a grain diet.

buffer acid production,” says Pete Gibbs, Extension horse specialist.

Some 30% of the million horses in

Texas are used in racing, showing and competitive performance, Gibbs notes.

But up to 90% of racehorses and more than 50% of arena performance horses have ulcers of varying severity, he says.

When they have ulcers, horses “don’t eat as well, work as well and don’t feel as good,” Gibbs says.

Feeding grain, confinement, exercise and overall environmental stress factors are thought to cause ulcers.

Nevertheless, studies have shown that horses will heal if they are provided less acidic diets.

## Alfalfa benefit

The recent research project in the department of animal science’s equine science program was part of Travis Lybbert’s master’s degree thesis in collaboration with the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine. Gibbs served on Lybbert’s academic research committee.

Twenty-four quarter horses, from 12 to 16 months old, were separated into two treatment groups in the research.

One group was fed bermudagrass hay, and the other fed alfalfa hay to meet daily roughage needs. The yearlings received forced exercise during the study.

The horses were examined internally with an endoscope at the beginning and end of two 28-day trials.

“It’s commonly thought that horses turned out on pastures are better off than horses that are confined,” he says. “However, if grass hay is the only hay they are fed, horses can still get gastric ulcers.”

## Worse without alfalfa

In the study, ulcer scores increased when alfalfa was removed from the horses’ diets, and they were turned out on pasture. Under the ulcer-scoring system, “0” signified no ulcers, with severity increasing to Level 4.

Horse owners, especially those with performance horses, have one of two options, Gibbs says.

They can give their horses a pharmaceutical product that will decrease acid production, he says. Or they can manage horses’ diets.

That second option does not stop acid production but offers buffering capabilities, Gibbs says. More work is needed to look at horses with varying degrees of ulceration to better determine the full extent to which alfalfa, or alfalfa-based products, might help from a feeding management standpoint.

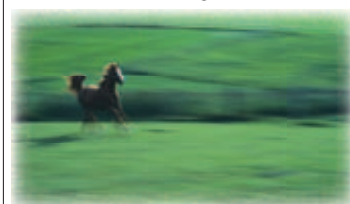
“Based on what we know right now — for horses that are kept in confinement, eating feed and getting forced exercise — it makes sense to consider some alfalfa as part of their diet,” he says.

Until more research is done, he recommends horses weighing between 1,000 and 1,300 pounds should be fed about 1 pound of alfalfa after a grain meal.

While this isn’t the first research conducted on gastric ulcers in horses, it lays the groundwork for more research at Texas A&M, Gibbs says.

The next study will investigate just what it is about alfalfa and alfalfa products that lessens the occurrence and severity of horses’ ulcers.

Chenault is with Texas A&M Communications, College Station.



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