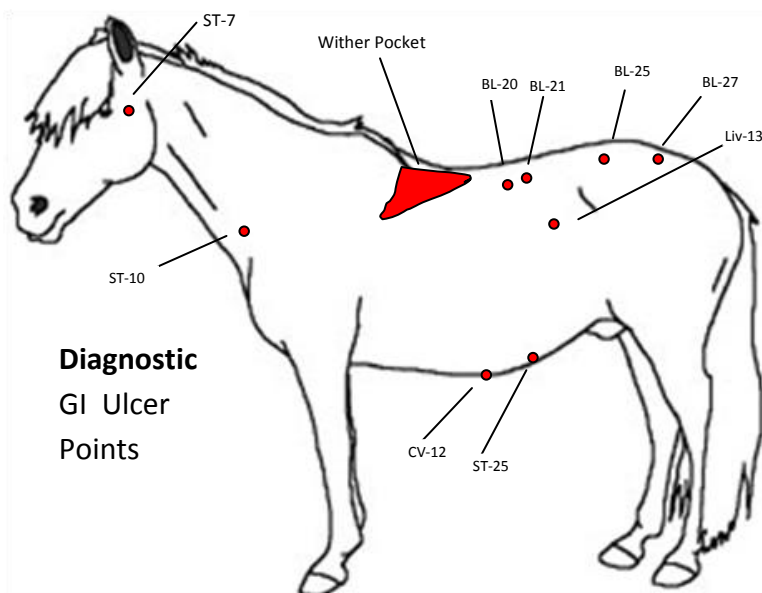


Have you ever wished that a horse could tell us what the problem is? What if there were signs on the surface of the body that could be analyzed to tell us what is wrong? Well, there is a way to do just that. Horses will often have a reproducible group of sensitive acupuncture points on the surface of their bodies which correspond to a particular ailment. Lameness problems can be localized to a definitive source. Internal medical problems can be sorted out logically. As an example of this concept, I want to discuss the identification and treatment of gastrointestinal ulcers in horses. In future articles, lameness patterns will be discussed.

In recent years, it has been shown that the incidence of gastrointestinal ulcers (GI Ulcers) in horses is much greater than previously believed. Up to 37% of leisure horses,<sup>1</sup> up to 63% of performance horses,<sup>2,3</sup> and up to 93% of racehorses<sup>4</sup> struggle with this condition. Even though GI ulcers are common, they are hard to diagnose. Stomach ulcers require an endoscopic examination to actually see the ulcers. Ulcers in the small intestine and large intestine are not usually visualized and are diagnosed based on suspicion and response to therapy.

The many possible and nonspecific symptoms of ulcers make diagnosis tricky. Horses may get touchy around the midsection for brushing, act girthy, kick out, or grind their teeth audibly. These horses may also demonstrate a decreased appetite or slow eating with many dunking their hay in water. Some owners notice a decrease in athletic performance or the refusal of jumps, perhaps because a horse is anticipating pain on the landing. Low levels of colic with or without weight loss and a dull hair coat may be seen. This variety of vague symptoms leave owners and veterinarians speculating as to what the source of the problem might be. Veterinarians and owners suspicious of ulcers will often treat with medications to see if a horse gets better, making the diagnosis after the fact. Other conditions which are commonly confused with gastrointestinal ulcers include musculoskeletal pain, Lyme disease, or an internal medical problem like a displaced large intestine, and even anxiety/stress from the local environment (barn or herd mates).

Fortunately, horses with ulcers often show a reproducible pattern of acupuncture point sensitivity that can be determined during an examination by an experienced equine acupuncturist. Also, these horses tend to get reflexive pain in the wither pocket area which can be quite severe. This pain is a good area for owners to check their animals if they are concerned about GI ulcers. Every horse I examine receives an acupuncture point examination using a plastic needle guide in my finger tips to deliver even consistent pressure to the skin surface. Acupuncture point sensitivity is detected when there is a twitch or reaction at a specific acupuncture point as I go over



**Diagnostic  
GI Ulcer  
Points**

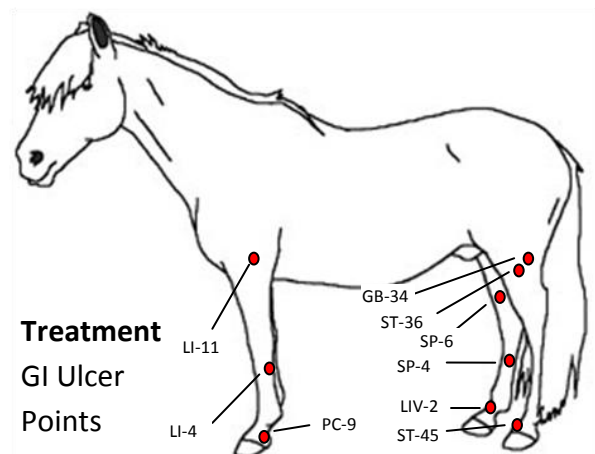
the skin with the needle guide. Here is a picture of this examination technique. I am over the wither pocket. The close-up is the actual needle guide I use for my examinations.



Not all points will be sensitive in every horse. Sometimes I will be able to localize the problem specifically to the stomach or colon based on the pattern of sensitivity because specific upper intestinal or colon points will be more reactive.

When I find a pattern of **diagnostic points** consistent with GI ulcers, I will then use other acupuncture points which help GI ulcers in horses, the **treatment points**. The treatment points are located far away from the diagnostic points on the body. **When treated, the reactivity in the wither pocket and diagnostic points disappear immediately!** This actually confirms my suspicion of gastrointestinal ulcers as the source of the problem.

Acupuncture, Chinese herbal formulas, and some changes to environment and diet are recommended which will promote a complete resolution of the problem. Any stressors in the environment which could be contributing to the formation of ulcers are discussed and addressed. Traditional treatment with omeprazole (Gastroguard<sup>®</sup>) by the primary care veterinarian is also an option. In my experience, ulcers tend to recur, so addressing as many inciting factors as possible is important. There is no reason why omeprazole can't be used with Chinese Herbs and diet changes. It is the latter which will allow the horse to heal completely and minimize the chance of recurrence. Omeprazole acts to decrease acid production in the stomach and is therefore not as effective for large intestinal ulceration, whereas herbs treat the whole body. The decreased acid production from omeprazole will allow stomach ulcers to heal and acupuncture and herbs address the underlying imbalance which led to the production of ulcers in the first place.



In summary, if a horse is exhibiting any of the symptoms of gastrointestinal ulcers, the best place to start is an examination by a qualified equine acupuncturist who can recognize the patterns of acupuncture sensitivity described in this article. Figuring out the source of the problem and fixing it quickly can often get a horse back into work happily and comfortably.

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