

Equine Gut Health: Top 10 Holistic Tips For Traveling and Competing With Your Horse



Do you have a horse that goes off their feed when traveling, develops diarrhea, or has behavioral problems due to gut pain? While you might be tempted to just view these issues as an annoyance, the underlying causes could be more insidious. Your horse's gut is super important to their long-term health. Understanding and preventing digestive upset can keep your horse happy and healthy for years to come.

Digestive issues are a significant cause of health problems in horses and can manifest in various common equine complaints. Stress from traveling and showing can be a major cause of these digestive problems and can also exacerbate any underlying digestive issues. Common complaints linked to poor digestive health include:

COLIC	GASTRIC AND HINDGUT ULCERS
LAMINITIS	UNDER WEIGHT
METABOLIC ISSUES	IMMUNE DYSFUNCTION
DAIRRHEA	POOR COAT QUALITY
EASY INJURED OR SICK	BEHAVIORAL ISSUES & SENSITIVITIES
POOR PERFORMANCE	ANXIOUS, NERVOUS, GROUCHY

Prevention with the following tips is essential to your horse's health.

Here's a guide to help support and balance your horse's digestive health when traveling.

#1 Understand Your Horse's [Digestive System](#)



After your horse eats, the food travels down the esophagus and into the single-chamber stomach. There, acids and enzymes start breaking down the carbs,

fats, and proteins in the feed. Next, the food moves into the small intestine, where even more enzymes are added. This is the main area where nutrients like sugars, fats, proteins, and some vitamins and minerals get digested and absorbed. Fiber keeps moving along until it reaches the hindgut, or large intestine.

But here's the thing—horses, like other mammals, can't digest fiber with enzymes, so your horse's system is set up for hindgut fermentation. The cecum and large colon are packed with bacteria and other microbes that can break down (or ferment) that fiber. Those microbes are called the hindgut microbiome. Keeping those microbes happy is part of your horse's gut health. In fact, the microbiome is important throughout the entire digestive tract. The [microbiome](#) refers to the rich, diverse collection of microorganisms (bacteria, fungi, viruses, and archaea) that live in the horse's digestive tract. In fact, they number around [100 trillion organisms](#) and may include [1000 different species](#). These microorganisms are critically important in digestive, immunological, and metabolic functions.

#2 Prioritize Top Quality Forage

Keep dust and weed-free hay by your horses at all times when traveling. Your horse is designed to eat small amounts of forage throughout the day, and their digestive system is made to always have some forage moving through it. If your horse is consuming hay too quickly, try a nibble net to extend their grazing time.

According to [Kentucky Equine Research](#), horses should consume between 1.5% and 2% of their body weight in forage per day. For instance, a 1000 lb horse would need around 15-20 pounds of forage as hay or pasture per day. Not only will lots of forage give them something to chew on and keep them occupied, but it will also prevent ulcers. Ulcers can be caused by:

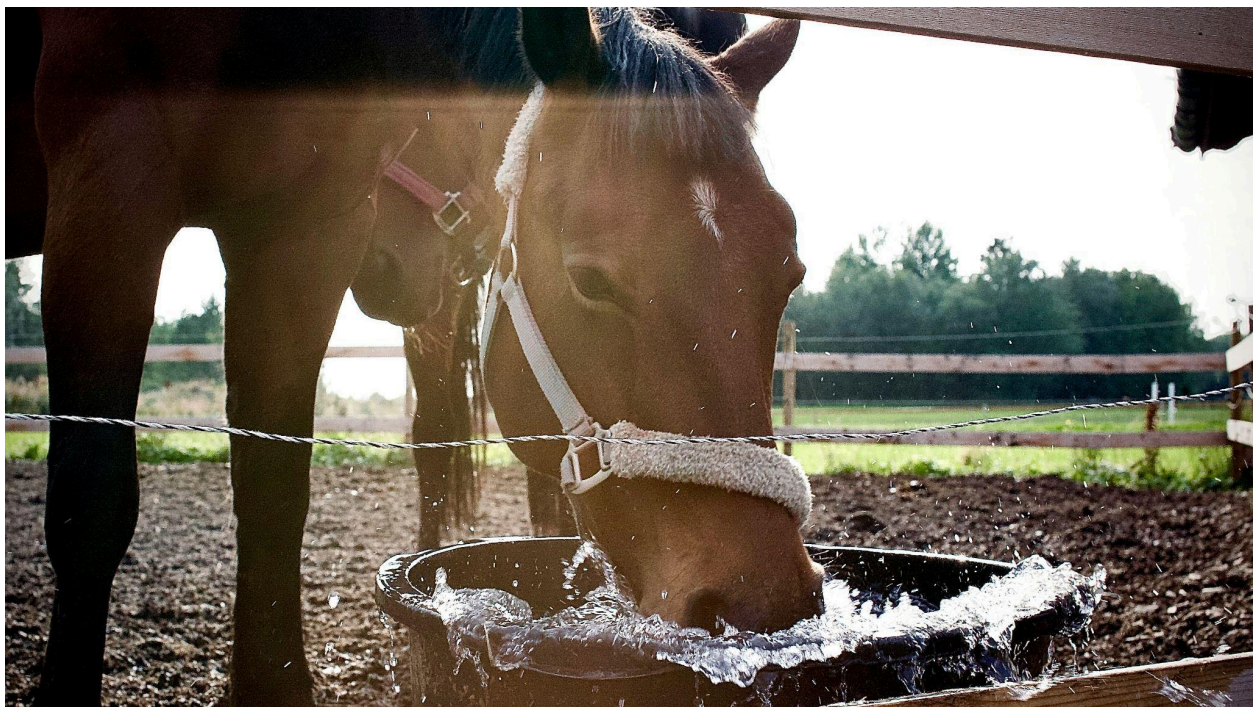
- Stress from training, trailering, showing, or poor management practices
- Intermittent feeding (horses produce acid continuously as they were evolutionarily evolved to graze and digest food all day long, letting them run out of forage, withholding food, or having large gaps between feedings is a large

contributor to equine ulcers as the acid erodes the stomach lining when it's empty)

- Vigorous exercise on an empty stomach causes splashing of digestive juices onto the unprotected part of the stomach, not intended to be exposed to stomach acid
- Stall confinement increases stress levels and diminishes social interaction
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) such as bute and banamine irritate the gut lining

Some horse owners will feed a little alfalfa hay during travel and showing, as the calcium content is thought to help buffer increased stomach acid production. A word of caution, as any changes to your horse's diet should be avoided during this high-stress period. In addition, alfalfa can upset your horse's microbiome if fed in too large quantities and cause more digestive problems.

#3 Keep Your Horse Hydrated



Some horses will not drink well when traveling. Ways to combat this are:

- Bring water from home so they are familiar with the type of water
- Keep water by them at all times

- Try an extra bucket of water with electrolytes to encourage drinking
- Soak their hay, grain, or treats in water, as dehydration can lead to colic and other digestive complaints

#4 Use Herbs and Supplements To Support Digestion

At times, your horse will need extra digestive support. The more stressed they get when traveling, the more you should consider mitigating digestive problems with herbs and supplements.

Consider supplementing with [pre-, post-, and probiotics](#) with at least 10-20 billion live colony-forming units (CFU). Probiotics introduce healthy bacteria, prebiotics feed the gut bacteria, and postbiotics support hindgut fermentation. In addition, some horses may need digestive enzymes to aid digestion. Talk with your equine practitioner for more information.

Herbal products can support digestion, coat the stomach with a protective lining, soothe digestive upset, and calm the horse to reduce stress levels. Always consult a trained and licensed practitioner before starting your horse on herbal products, and research the rules and regulations on using herbal products at shows. Some herbal metabolites will cause a horse to test positive for drug use. Herbs to discuss with your practitioner include:

- *Ulmus rubra*: Slippery elm bark
- *Althaea officinalis*: Marshmallow root
- *Calendula officinalis*: Calendula
- *Matricaria recutita*: Chamomile
- *Glycyrrhiza glabra*: Licorice
- *Curcuma longa*: Turmeric
- *Pinelliae Ternatae*: Pinnellia
- *Atractylodis Macrocephalae*: Atractylodes

#5 Walk Your Horse Often

Get your horse out and walking around to keep the digestive system moving. This can be hand-grazing to get their head down, get some fresh grass, and clear out their nasal

passages. It can also be walking around the showgrounds to see the sights, let out some extra energy, and keep their lymph and blood flowing.



#6 Feed a Whole Foods, Plant-Based Diet In Small Amounts

Chemically laden, highly processed grain is difficult to digest and taxes the digestive system of your horse unnecessarily. Consult with a holistic equine nutritionist to ensure your horses are getting all the macro and micro nutrients they need with a diet that will also support digestive health. Many equine feeds have synthetic vitamins and minerals that are poorly absorbed and used by the horse. In addition, most are laden with cheap sources of energy. Switching your horse to a whole-food-based diet with the proper carbs, fats, and proteins will ensure gut health. However, do not make any feed changes when traveling. Once at the show, it is recommended to feed small amounts and spread them over many feedings to prevent gut upset.

#7 Minimize Stress

Even though you and your horse are in a stressful environment, it's important to develop practices to minimize stress. Some stress-reducing suggestions to incorporate into your traveling and showing experience are:

- Rest often and schedule quiet time
- Play soft music during travel and in the stabling area
- Set aside time to meditate and include your horse in the process, too
- Turn the lights off at night in the barn
- Make sure your horse is cool, comfortable, and well fed

#8 Keep Up With Regular Dental Care



Dental care is very important in horses. They have a reserve crown of tooth below the surface of the gums that erupts out about 1/8 inch per year. Regular dental maintenance (every 6-12 months) is mandatory to prevent pain, aid eating and digestion, and improve performance. While this is not something you will do when traveling, it's important to stay on top of your horse's dental care to prevent any issues once on the road.

#9 Regularly Deworm Your Horse

Parasite loads can damage the digestive tract, leading to weight loss, poor conditioning, colic, diarrhea, and increased susceptibility to stress. This is another maintenance requirement to avoid digestive problems and to help your horse overcome the rigors of travel and showing. You want to give your horse every opportunity to thrive. Good maintenance is as important as the training.

#10 Try Acupuncture To Balance The Digestive System

Chinese medicine is a complete system of care for your horse that can aid in top performance and optimal health. [Acupuncture](#) has been shown to reduce stress, regulate the immune system, alleviate intestinal inflammation, repair the gut, and balance the microbiome. Acupuncture treatments before, during, and after travel are warranted as an effective treatment to avoid digestive upset and prevent common digestive complaints. To learn more about acupuncture for your horse, visit acupointtherapies.com

Stress from traveling and showing doesn't have to send your horse spiraling into digestive upset that takes weeks of rest or medication to recover from. By following these 10 tips, you can manage your horse's gut health, prevent digestive upset, and optimize your horse's digestion when at home or on the road.