

(The following is a Q&A published in *Equine Wellness*.)

Loose Stool

Dr. Christine King

Question:

What would help my 19 year old Thoroughbred's loose stools? They are very soft and watery and when he passes gas, brown liquid oozes out and runs down his back legs. He also had several severe colic episodes the last year at the center, but none since he has lived with me. He's had no vaccines the last year and his stools have been neg. for worms. He's eating about 1/3 pound of oats with a little rice bran, flax, supplements twice a day plus free choice grass hay. He looks a little too thin now and I am concerned with winter approaching. I did try some slippery elm bark.

Answer:

There are many different reasons why a horse would have loose manure. His history of repeated colic episodes helps narrow the field a bit. Even though no worms were found in his manure, he could still have internal parasites. Two important equine parasites evade detection on routine fecal analysis: small strongyles (aka cyathostomes) and tapeworms. Both can cause colic, and small strongyles in particular can cause chronic diarrhea, especially in older horses. I don't know anything about your set-up, so I'd suggest you discuss an appropriate parasite control program with your primary-care veterinarian.

Another common cause for chronic diarrhea or simply an excess of fecal liquor (the brown liquid that is running down his hind legs) is an upset in the population of bacteria, protozoa, and other microbes in the cecum and colon (collectively termed the large intestine). A healthy microbial population in the large intestine is essential for the horse's health and well-being. So, in addition to reviewing his parasite control program, I would probably suggest the use of a digestive aid which helps restore and maintain a healthy microbial population in the large intestine.

There are several good probiotic or prebiotic products on the market for horses. "Restore" by Hilton Herbs (available at www.chamisaridge.com) is very good, but it is also very expensive. Two of my other favorite products are "Bio-Sponge" by Platinum Performance (www.platinumperformance.com) and "ADR" by Kentucky Performance Products (www.kentuckyperformanceproducts.com). "Fastrack" (Conklin Co.) and "Ration Plus" (SE Monroe Inc.) also are useful products for this purpose.

And then there is the question of social well-being. It is not uncommon for horses to develop loose manure when under some sort of social stress, such as isolation, being parted from friends, or simply not belonging to a stable group of horses. So, ensure that your boy is able to make and keep good social bonds with horses he likes and with whom he feels safe and secure.

There are many other possible causes of the symptoms you described, so it would also be a good idea to consult your primary-care vet about further diagnostics (routine bloodwork and rectal exam, for starters).

As for slippery elm, I just can't resist editorializing about it while I have the floor. I do not use slippery elm anymore, because the unscrupulous (and in some cases illegal)

wild harvesting of slippery elm bark is having a devastating effect on the dwindling population of these trees. United Plant Savers even has it on their “at risk” list of plants. One good alternative to slippery elm for gastrointestinal inflammation is marshmallow root.

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