

Merial's GastroGard, First Ulcer Drug For Horses, Is Version of Astra's Pipeline

By Otesa Middleton

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WASHINGTON -- Mr. Ed could have asked for it by name.

If the TV-sitcom talking horse were around, he could take advantage of the first equine-ulcer medication approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

Called GastroGard, the drug is the horse version of Prilosec, the top-selling human medicine made by Sweden's Astra AB that last year recorded \$5 billion in sales for treatment of ulcers in people.

Jami Whiting, a Lexington, Ky., veterinarian, said she has been treating horses with the human version of the drug, because no drug had been approved specifically to treat the ailment in horses.

Sergio Traversa, an analyst who follows Astra for Mehta Partners, said he doesn't think GastroGard will cut into sales of Prilosec. "There is no way to know how much is prescribed for horses," he said of the blockbuster drug. "I don't think we will see any tangible, significant effect" on sales of Prilosec.

Gastric ulcers are common in horses in "stressful environments," the FDA said in its release last week about GastroGard's approval. The disease "is debilitating and often leads to death, especially among foals," it said.

GastroGard, made by Merial Ltd., a joint venture of Merck & Co. and RhonePoulenc SA of France, will be available in two weeks. Janice Keene, a Merial spokeswoman, said the drug will cost about \$40 a day to treat an ulcer in a race horse of average size. The FDA also approved the drug to prevent recurrence of ulcers; the maintenance dose will cost about \$20 a day. "It is a very good value to help the horses return to peak health," Ms. Keene said. Merial has an agreement with Astra to develop and market the drug for horses, she said.

According to the company's release, equine gastric-ulcer syndrome affects as many as 1.8 million performance horses in the U.S. The most-stressed horses, those that race, are hit hardest. As much as 93% of race horses have ulcers, which are caused by stomach acid, it said.

Merial listed the telltale signs of horse ulcers as decreased appetite, poor hair coat, poor body condition and poor performance. The ulcers are blamed on feeding practices, competing, training, trailering and hospitalization.

The company studied GastroGard in 300 horses of nine different breeds. The drug, an oral paste, is administered through a prefilled syringe.

About 8.5 million horses in the U.S. get veterinary treatment, according to Joseph Spiteri, president of Market Dynamics Inc., an animal-health data firm. Of the horses

brought in for veterinary care, less than 5% are seen for digestive-system problems, he said.

Dr. Whiting, the Lexington veterinarian, said race horses are more prone to gastric ulcers because of their environment. "Race horses are kept in stalls, they eat a high-carbohydrate diet and are exercised a lot," she said.