

CUSHING'S DISEASE IN DOGS

What is Cushing's disease?

Cushing's disease or "hyperadrenocorticism" is caused by over-production of the hormone cortisol by the adrenal glands (located just over the dog's kidneys).

The adrenal glands are regulated by the pituitary gland situated in the brain. The pituitary produces a hormone, ACTH, which in turn stimulates the adrenal glands to produce cortisol. Occasionally, an ACTH-producing growth will form in the pituitary gland. This is the commonest form of Cushing's disease, accounting for about 85% of all cases. The disease can also be caused by a cortisol-producing tumour forming within the adrenal gland.

Which animals are most likely to get it?

This disease is most commonly seen in dogs over 5 years of age.

What are the symptoms?

Many of the symptoms of Cushing's disease are caused specifically by the overproduction of cortisol. Early signs include excessive drinking and urination, an increase in appetite and subsequent obesity. Affected dogs also develop a pronounced pot belly with generalised muscle wasting. The skin becomes thinner and more susceptible to grazes and infections while the hair coat becomes very sparse.

Diagnosing Cushing's disease

Cushing's disease is usually diagnosed by carrying out a blood test and injection in the morning, followed by a further blood test later that day. The information gathered from these tests will help to confirm the presence of the disease, and whether it is caused by a tumour of the pituitary gland or the adrenal gland.

How is it treated?

Most cases of Cushing's disease can now be managed safely and successfully with medications specific to this disease. A common product, trilostane, works by reducing the production of cortisol. It can take a while to find the dose that best suits your dog, and once stabilized we will need to check blood samples from time to time on a regular basis to make sure everything is progressing as it should. In most cases, dogs will respond well to this treatment and go on to live a good, happy life; but the final outcome will depend upon the severity of the condition and how well your dog responds to initial treatment.

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