



Canine Cushing's Disease



Cushing's disease, also known as hyperadrenocorticism, is a chronic condition that is common in middle aged and senior dogs. It occurs when a dog's pituitary gland or the adrenal glands produce too much cortisone (a steroid hormone, or glucocorticoid, that the body normally produces as a response to stress). In about 80% of cases this imbalance is caused by a small tumor in the pituitary gland (located in the brain) that stimulates secretion of the hormone ACTH. This causes the adrenal glands (located in front of the kidneys) to produce more and more cortisone. This type of Cushing's disease is referred to as pituitary-dependent Cushing's disease. The second type, adrenal-based Cushing's disease, which accounts for about 20% of cases in dogs, is usually the result of an adrenal gland tumor.

Clinical signs of Cushing's disease are usually noticed around six or seven years of age. The classic combination of signs in a dog with Cushing's disease includes:

- ✓ Excessive water consumption and increased urination. This may result in frequent "accidents" in the house;
- ✓ A marked increase in appetite. This may lead to begging, stealing food, and getting into the garbage;
- ✓ Abdominal enlargement, producing a characteristic "pot-bellied" appearance;
- ✓ Lethargy or inactivity;
- ✓ Hair loss and thinning of the skin;
- ✓ Excessive panting.

Clinical signs of Cushing's disease can be very dramatic and can greatly affect the whole family's quality of life. Thankfully, new treatment options are available that can greatly improve your dog's quality of life as well as yours!

If Cushing's disease is suspected, your veterinarian will need to run some basic lab tests, starting with a complete blood count, chemistry profile, and urinalysis. An ACTH stimulation test or Dexamethasone suppression test may then be indicated to help further confirm the presence of Cushing's disease and to classify it as adrenal- or pituitary-dependent. This knowledge can help to dictate treatment options.

Therapy for Cushing's disease can be complicated because many patients with Cushing's disease also suffer from other health problems. In most cases, medical treatment is aimed at relief of symptoms, rather than cure. The goal of



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treatment then becomes making your dog (and you) more comfortable. Effective medications, such as Trilostane (Veteryl) and Mitotane (Lysodren) are available. Each of these medications have potential serious side effects and regular monitoring of labwork is essential to ensure that your pet is receiving an appropriate dosage. Discuss these considerations, along with estimated cost of treatment, with your veterinarian to help decide what are the best treatment options for your dog and your family.

Surgery to remove the tumor and the affected adrenal gland is an option for dogs with adrenal-based Cushing's disease. If the tumor is benign, prognosis for a complete cure is good. However, the surgery (adrenalectomy) is very risky. Furthermore, these adrenal tumors are found to be malignant in about 50% of cases and may have already metastasized (spread) to other organs by the time of diagnosis. Given these risks, most owners choose medical therapy rather than surgery. Surgery is not a practical option for dogs with the pituitary form of the disease.

If your dog suffers from any of the characteristic signs listed above, talk to your veterinarian. Thanks to recent advances in medical therapy, the outlook for dogs with Cushing's disease is better than ever!