

Cushing's Disease in Dogs

What is Cushing's Disease?

Cushing's disease, also known as 'hyperadrenocorticism', is due to an overproduction of a naturally occurring steroid called 'cortisol'. 80 -85 % of Cushing's cases are due to a disorder of the pituitary gland in the brain, (of which a small percentage are cancerous), which over stimulates the adrenal glands to produce cortisol. The remaining 15 - 20 % of cases are caused by a tumour in the adrenal gland in the abdomen, which then secretes too much cortisol. A third form of Cushing's disease can be accidentally induced by long term use of high doses of steroid containing medications.

What are the Symptoms?

The symptoms associated with Cushing's disease can be subtle, extensive and easily be mistaken for old age changes. The more obvious signs are drinking excessively and needing to urinate during the night. Your pet may develop a pot belly, thin skin, and a poor coat or may have little energy, bruise easily and pant heavily. A common complication is high blood pressure - which can be dangerous in itself as it can cause blindness, seizures or sudden death.

How is Cushing's Disease Diagnosed?

From the history and a physical examination of your pet, your vet may be suspicious of Cushing's disease and suggest blood tests. There are different tests that may need to be run in order to pinpoint the exact nature of your pet's Cushing's disease. The starting point is usually a general screening blood profile to help rule out other causes of excessive thirst. Next is a stimulation test that looks at the body's ability to regulate natural steroid production. Unfortunately, sometimes no single test can both confirm Cushing's disease and give a definitive answer as to whether it is pituitary or adrenal based - and more than one set of tests may need to be performed.

If the vet suspects an adrenal origin for the disease, then an ultrasound scan to visualize the enlarged adrenal gland may be suggested. This distinction can be important, as adrenal based disease is best treated by surgery, rather than with drugs. Lastly, dogs with Cushing's disease are more likely to suffer from high blood pressure (hypertension) and the vet may well suggest measuring blood pressure.

How is Cushing's Disease Treated?

The most common forms of Cushing's disease are easily treated with a once daily capsule of a medication which contains the active ingredient trilostane. However, if tests suggest the problem lies in the adrenal gland, then referral to a specialist surgeon to remove the tumour carries a good outlook. One of the common side effects of Cushing's disease is high blood pressure or hypertension. If your pet is diagnosed with this, then a medication that lowers blood

pressure, such as amlodopine, may be prescribed. Any pet on treatment will need monitoring blood tests, to check cortisol levels, usually every three months.

Will Cushing's Disease Shorten my Pets Life?

Although a serious disease, the majority of dogs treated for Cushing's disease enjoy a good quality life for many years. However, a small percentage may suffer from the effects of high blood pressure which in extreme cases can include blindness, seizures or sudden death.

Please feel free to contact the surgery should you have any further questions about your dog's condition.