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Cushing's Disease and Your Pet

Cushing's Disease (Hyperadrenocorticism) is a condition suffered by dogs due to an over-activity of their adrenal glands. This results in excess secretion of the body's natural corticosteroid, Cortisol.

What causes it?

The over activity can be due to one of two main reasons. About 80% of animals with Cushing's disease actually have a benign tumor of the Pituitary gland. This functional tumor secretes a hormone that stimulates the adrenal gland into over-production. The other 20% of animals have a tumor of the adrenal gland itself, which is over-producing the Cortisol directly. Of this second type, about 50% of the tumors are malignant.

What are the clinical signs?

Those dogs suffering from Cushing's disease will often;

- be dull and lethargic
- have an altered appetite
- drink and urinate excessive volumes
- develop a bloated abdomen
- suffer substantial hair-loss

How do you diagnose it?

Older dogs suffering from the clinical signs listed above would be suspected of suffering from Cushing's disease. Few cases will ever fit the 'textbook' picture, however, and the diagnosis will often be confirmed with the aid of laboratory testing.

These tests might include an analysis of your pet's urine and a general health test performed on their blood. Confirmation of the diagnosis is likely to include a further blood test that involves stimulating their pituitary-adrenal axis with artificial Cortisone and then measuring the body's response over several hours, or by ultrasound examination of their adrenal glands.

How do you treat it?

The treatment of Cushing's varies depending on the type that is suffered. If your pet falls into the 20% of cases with an adrenal tumor, surgical removal of the gland may be an option.

It is more likely that they would be one of the 80% of cases with a pituitary-based problem and would therefore be a good candidate for medical treatment. This involves giving tablets to block the production of the excess Cortisol and therefore reduce the extent of the clinical signs.

Either course of treatment is quite complex, and not without its risks. Your vet will run through a detailed treatment plan with you, and answer any questions you may have. If you have any questions regarding your pet's excessive thirst, lethargy or weight-gain ... don't hesitate to ask.

"Caring for the pets of Ipswich since 1967"

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