

EQUINE CUSHING'S DISEASE

Equine Cushing's Disease is one of the most common endocrine disorders affecting the older horse.

WHAT CAUSES CUSHING'S DISEASE?

The clinical signs seen with Cushing's disease are related to the effects of the abnormal secretion of hormones and neurotransmitters by an adenoma of the pars intermedia of the pituitary gland, located within the brain. The abnormal gland over-secretes a variety of hormone molecules that have widespread effects on all body systems. The gland also becomes insensitive to regulatory feedback loops, which normally control hormone levels within physiologic ranges.

WHO GETS CUSHING'S DISEASE?

Horses and ponies of all breeds and both sexes are affected by the disease. The average age of onset of clinical signs is typically the late teens.

Supportive care is essential to helping your horse stay as healthy as possible.

WHAT ARE THE CLINICAL SIGNS?

Cushing's disease shares many clinical signs with other systemic diseases, making a complete evaluation by your veterinarian critical for proper treatment. Signs of Cushing's disease may include: excessive water intake coupled with excessive urination, the development of a long, shaggy haircoat that does not shed out in the summer, abnormal sweating, muscle-wasting (especially along the topline) with the development of a pot-bellied appearance, increased susceptibility to infections and chronic laminitis.

DIAGNOSIS?

Your veterinarian diagnoses Cushing's disease in your horse by a combination of tools: physical examination, screening bloodwork to rule out other systemic diseases, and specific hormonal tests. Depending on the individual case, your veterinarian selects the most appropriate tests to help determine the cause of your horse's problem.

TREATMENT?

Treatment for Cushing's disease is all about management. Specific medical management of the disease involves drugs directed at altering the balance of neurotransmitters in the brain to help control the abnormal hormone secretion by the pituitary gland. The two drugs commonly used for this purpose both require daily treatment. Improvement in the clinical signs and bloodwork takes several weeks to begin to occur. There is also a wide range of effective dosages for either drug, meaning that it may take weeks to months to determine the dose that is most effective for your horse.

Supportive care for your horse is essential to helping him or her stay as healthy as possible. Because a horse with Cushing's disease is more susceptible to infections of any type, basic preventative health care is even more important now. Work with your veterinarian to develop a vaccination, deworming and dental care schedule that best

suits his/her needs. Feed a high -quality, readily digestible, not too energy-dense feed (such a product for senior horses). Pay close attention to his haircoat and skin, as infections like dermatophilosis (“rain rot”) are common. You may wish to clip your horse and blanket as needed to help him thermoregulate better. Be sure to provide routine foot care such as regular trimming of his feet, even if he’s not being ridden, to help identify and address any foot problems. These horses are at an increased risk for the development of problems like laminitis and foot abscesses.

Most importantly, good geriatric care is the best strategy for ensuring a good quality of life for your horse as he or she reaches the mid-teen years. Working with your veterinarian to identify problems early and creating a preventive health care program that suits the needs of your horse as an individual can help keep your aging horse a happy horse!