

Quality Care Animal Hospital
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Cushing's Disease (Hyperadrenocorticism)

Cushing's Disease (Hyperadrenocorticism) is an overproduction of steroids in the body. Cushing's Disease is caused by the body producing too many steroids. The main steroid involved is cortisol. Dog's with Cushing's Disease may have a pot bellied appearance and a thin hair coat sometimes bordering on baldness. They may drink a lot of water and urinate a lot and may also pant excessively. They may have chronic skin problems and chronic infections due to the cortisol suppressing their immune system.

There are two potential causes for Cushing's Disease. Most canine patients have the form that involves a pituitary tumor. The tumor is almost always benign but produces an excess of a hormone that tells the adrenal glands to ramp up the steroid production. The other cause of Cushing's Disease involves a tumor in the adrenal gland itself that is producing the steroid regardless of pituitary influence. These adrenal tumors are often malignant. As mentioned, most dogs have the pituitary type of Cushing's Disease.

Diagnosis of Cushing's Disease involves bloodwork to detect the presence of excessive cortisol. If the screening test shows evidence of excessive cortisol then there are other tests that can be done to confirm that the problem is Cushing's Disease. If Cushing's Disease is diagnosed then treatment exists that can alleviate the symptoms of the disease and return the dog to as near normal as possible. In humans treatment for the pituitary tumor usually involves surgery to remove the tumor. The surgery is actually done through the nose of the patient. I mention this because the procedure is actually much more involved and complicated in dogs due to their large sinuses and long nose. The procedure is performed on dogs and it is still being perfected as a possible cure. Without surgery, dogs with Cushing's Disease can be treated with medication that dampens the steroid production.

Dogs with Cushing's Disease caused by an adrenal tumor often carry a worse prognosis because the tumor is often cancerous. These cases require surgery to attempt to removed the diseased adrenal gland that is involved. But the majority of dogs have the benign pituitary tumor form of Cushing's Disease. If one suspects Cushing's Disease then the screening test is recommended to rule it out. If the test indicates that the dog may have Cushing's Disease then other bloodwork is necessary to confirm the disease and help determine whether the cause originates from the pituitary or the adrenal gland itself.

With treatment and monitoring most patients with Cushing's Disease can have the disease controlled and have a much better quality of life.