



Birchwood Animal Hospital

For the love of animals since 1959

Birchwood Animal Hospital

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CUSHING'S DISEASE / HYPERADRENOCORTICISM

What is it?

Cushing's Disease is a relatively common hormonal imbalance of middle-aged and older dogs. Specifically, "cortisol" – one of the body's hormones – is elevated. This can either be due to a tumour in the adrenal gland, or a benign tumour in the pituitary gland leads to an overstimulated adrenal gland. Either way, too much cortisol is produced.

What are the symptoms?

Cortisol affects every part of the body, so a wide range of symptoms can be seen. It is important to keep in mind that every individual is different and your dog may show only some or possibly even none of the listed symptoms:

- Increased water consumption, appetite and urination
- Excessive panting
- Partial loss of housetraining
- Thin hair coat
- Change in behaviour ("senility")
- Bloated abdomen ("potbelly" appearance)



How is it diagnosed?

A definitive diagnosis can only be made with a series of blood tests. If your dog has suspicious symptoms, a general chemistry screen and urinalysis is usually run initially (this helps rule out other diseases such as diabetes and kidney disease that can have similar symptoms). If this test indicates the possibility of Cushing's Disease, a confirmatory test is then run and, if positive, a third and final test may be performed to distinguish between the adrenal and pituitary forms of the disease.

How is Cushing's treated?

The treatment depends on the form of the disease:

1. Pituitary-Dependant:
85% - 90% of Cushing's dogs have this form. Pituitary dependent Cushing's disease is treated with oral medication to shrink the adrenal glands. Medication is given in two phases: an induction phase and a maintenance phase. During the induction phase, the medication is given twice daily to shrink the adrenal glands. We have reached the end of the induction phase when your pet's appetite or thirst decreases.
2. Adrenal-Dependant:
10% - 15% of Cushing's dogs have this form of the disease and it is more difficult to treat. Generally a surgery is recommended to remove the affected adrenal gland(s). Afterward, the patient is put on lifelong medication to replace the normal levels of hormones that the gland would have produced. If surgery isn't an option, a medication to shrink the adrenal gland may be attempted.

What do I need to know about the medication?

- Cushing's disease is generally treated with lysodren, a human chemotherapy drug. It can have some side effects but is our most effective tool for fighting this disease.
- *Lysodren is given twice daily until your pet's appetite and/or thirst begins to decrease.* This may mean hesitating at the food dish or taking longer to eat. Once this occurs, discontinue the medication. If you are unsure, please call your veterinarian for guidance. ***If the medication is given past the point that your pet's appetite has decreased then damage can result.***

To be sure that your pet's appetite has truly decreased we recommend feeding them only $\frac{3}{4}$ of their regular diet while they are on the medication. This makes it easier to tell when their appetite has decreased as they should be hungry!

- Please inform your veterinarian and discontinue the medication if you see any of the following:



*Lack of appetite or thirst
Weakness or lethargy
Vomiting
Diarrhea*

- It is important to give the medication with food so that it is digested properly and to decrease risk of stomach upset.
- Please wear gloves/wash your hands after handling the medication as we do not want you to absorb any of it through the skin. Keep out of reach of children.

What happens once my pet's appetite decreases?

- Once the appetite decreases, you should discontinue the medication. Your veterinarian will discuss repeating an cortisol test to determine if the over-active adrenal glands have normalized.
- Once the induction phase is completed, we then give the medication once weekly to keep the adrenal glands at a reduced size. Please call for refills of the medication as necessary.
- We generally repeat the cortisol test every 6 to 12 months or as needed to ensure that your pet is properly regulated.

What can I expect now?

- Pets that have been diagnosed with Cushing's disease and are treated (with lysodren) tend to have a better quality of life and longer lives than those that are left untreated.
- On occasion we may need to adjust your pet's dosage of medication, annual examination is key.
- Your questions or concerns will be addressed as they arise. Please call us for assistance.

What happens if the disease goes untreated?

While Cushing's Disease does not directly cause the death of the patient, it inevitably leads to such a severe deterioration (loss of energy, urinary accidents, secondary infections, etc.) that the quality of life becomes extremely poor. This can take anywhere from a few months to a year or more to occur.