



Cushing's Fact Sheet

What is Cushing's Disease?

Cushing's Disease (also known as PPID, short for Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction), is a chronic progressive condition of the endocrine system. The endocrine system is the organ system responsible for the production of hormones throughout the body.

Cushing's is one of most common problems affecting the endocrine system in horses and ponies, particularly those over fifteen years of age.

What causes Cushing's Disease?

Cushing's disease is caused by the overproduction of hormones by an enlarged and overactive pituitary gland - a pea-sized gland at the base of brain responsible for producing a number of important hormones. The Pars Intermedia (middle part) of this gland enlarges and this leads to overproduction of the hormone ACTH. This ACTH hormone travels in the bloodstream to the adrenal glands (near the kidneys) and stimulates them to produce more cortisol (a steroid hormone). It is the overproduction of cortisol which causes most of the clinical signs associated with Cushing's.

What are the clinical signs of Cushing's Disease?

- Hirsutism - excessive hair growth or abnormal retention of hair during the summer months. CUSHING'S IS THE ONLY DISEASE KNOWN TO CAUSE THIS CLINICAL SIGN.
- Laminitis - it is thought that 90% of laminitis cases have Cushing's or EMS as an underlying cause
- Abnormal fat deposition and insulin resistance - commonly these fat deposits are found around the eyes.
- Pot bellied appearance
- Loss of muscle condition
- Lethargy or poor performance
- Increased drinking and urination
- Increased appetite
- Lower immune function - this can lead to recurrent infections eg skin and respiratory.

Diagnosis

Older ponies showing classical signs can often be diagnosed from appearance alone! However, not all cases show such overt clinical signs. Usually we will suggest taking a blood sample to look at levels of ACTH. ACTH levels decrease rapidly in stored blood so it is important that samples are transported for analysis rapidly and are kept frozen or chilled.

Other tests for Cushing's exist and these can be discussed with your vet.

How can I prevent or manage Cushing's Disease?

Unfortunately there is no cure for Cushing's disease but with appropriate medication and management there is no reason why an affected horse cannot lead a relatively normal life!

Pergolide is the only licensed medication to demonstrate sufficient benefit and works by reducing the production of cortisol. Pergolide is available in a tablet form (Prascend) that can be administered in feed.

Management is as important as treatment in horses affected by Cushing's Disease.

Regular monitoring for infections and wounds is very important as these animals have a lowered immunity and will likely require veterinary attention. Regular farrier visits, dental checks and good worm management are also vital to ensure good general health in Cushing's cases.

Associated conditions, such as laminitis, need to be managed and treated quickly by your vet – Please remember laminitis can be very serious. Additionally, simple steps such as clipping will help to prevent excessive sweating and improve comfort if your horse grows a thick coat.

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CONTACT US WITH ANY CUSHING'S RELATED QUESTIONS.

OUR VETS ARE ALWAYS HAPPY TO OFFER ADVICE.

01296 621 840

equine@whvc.co.uk