



Equine Cushing's Disease

What is Cushing's Disease? Cushing's Disease was first described in 1930 by Dr. Harvey Cushing. It is defined as hyperadrenocorticism or too much cortisol (stress hormone) in the body. Cushing's Disease is recognized in humans, horses, and dogs.

What is Equine Cushing's Disease? Equine Cushing's Disease is most commonly caused by benign (non-cancerous) growth of the intermediate lobe of the pituitary gland in the brain. It is also known as pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction, or "PPID". When this increase in size occurs, excess ACTH is released into the blood stream. ACTH then travels to the adrenal glands and causes the release of cortisol.

Is my horse at risk? Cushing's Disease is very common in older horses. It is estimated that greater than 30% of horses over 20 years of age are affected. The disease is more common in geldings than stallions, and certain breeds, for example pony breeds, Morgans, and Arabians are more commonly affected.

Clinical Signs:

- Hirsutism (long, wooly haircoat; inappropriate shedding)
- Change in body composition (muscle loss, abnormal fat deposits with weight loss)
- Compromised immune system
- Increased drinking and urination
- Mares cycle poorly
- Change in metabolism (insulin sensitivity; fat tolerance)
- Laminitis
 - Usually a chronic issue
 - Most common cause of euthanasia in horses with Cushing's Disease
 - Possibly caused by increased cortisol or change in insulin sensitivity. No one really knows for sure.

Diagnosis:

- Clinical signs
- Resting ACTH and insulin levels
- Dexamethasone Suppression Test
- Domperidone Challenge Test
- Radiographs for laminitis

Treatment:

- Prascend (pergolide mesylate)
- Laminitis prevention and management
- Dietary recommendations—these will vary on a case-by-case basis.

TAKE HOME MESSAGE: Cushing's is very common in older horses. It is important to recognize the signs early and start treatment with Pergolide. Laminitis prevention and treatment is critical.