Cushings Disease

Also known as PPID (Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction) or ECD (Equine Cushing’s Disease)

What is Cushings Disease?

Cushings Disease is caused by a malfunction of the pituitary or adrenal glands, often caused by a tumour. This gland controls hormone levels and the tumour often results in excess levels of the natural steroid, glucocorticoid, being produced which create an imbalance in the horse. The cause of this tumour is currently unknown. The disease most commonly affects horses and ponies over the age of 15, although younger cases, some as young as 10, are being documented all the time. At The Mare and Foal Sanctuary we routinely test any animal over the age of 12 or if they have had repeated laminitis for no apparent reason.

How can I recognise it?

Symptoms associated with Cushings Disease include uneven and strong hair growth coupled with moulting problems (i.e. a horse may not lose its winter coat in the spring and have a shaggy appearance). This can cause heavy sweating and an increased thirst. Increased urination is also common. This may also cause a general loss of condition and may also bring in other problems such as laminitis and other hoof problems; specifically hoof infections and abscesses, infections, tooth problems, sinusitis and other problems – mostly due to a suppressed immune system. Muscle tone is quickly lost, especially along the topline, and a “pot belly” appears, the horse also becomes weak and sleepy and can develop nervous system problems including seizures. Laboured breathing can also occur, as can a “creasty” neck, bulging of the fleshy pads over the eyes, dipped back and infertility. Horses affected by Cushings can also develop insulin-resistant diabetes.

Diagnosis can be confirmed by a simple blood test that can be performed by your vet. They will measure the level of the hormone ACTH in the horse’s bloodstream. The normal level of ACTH changes according to the time of year, horses naturally have a higher level in the autumn. This is normally the best time to run the test.

How do I manage a horse with Cushings?

Depending on how advanced the disease is, treatment may include the use of drugs. However, you may just need to monitor the horse closely for any changes in behaviour, changes in condition or foot problems, especially laminitis. Your vet may recommend routine testing once your horse is on medication to ensure the dose is correct. Horses with excessively long coats may need to be partially clipped to remain comfortable.

At The Mare and Foal Sanctuary horses with Cushings will have annual blood tests, usually in the autumn to ensure their condition is managed as effectively as possible.

Contact us

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