

## Ferrets and Adrenal Disease

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Ferrets can be fun, feisty and furry but they can also be full of health problems! When it comes to ferrets, there are several diseases we commonly see that cause problems. One of the more common problems we encounter is adrenal disease.

To understand this disease, it's important to know what a healthy adrenal gland does. The adrenal gland is a small organ that is located in the abdomen near the kidneys. Two are present, one on the right, and one on the left. These glands normally function to produce several hormones, including testosterone, estrogen, and adrenaline. In addition, they have many other roles such as generating stress hormones and regulating blood pressure. Adrenal gland disease is always marked by the presence of a tumor. This tumor then causes normal functions of the gland to be impaired, resulting in a variety of clinical signs. Most of the tumors are benign, meaning they will not spread to other places. However, a small percentage do have the potential to be malignant and spread to other organs.

The most common age at which adrenal disease is identified is when a ferret is middle aged - usually around 4-5 years old. Often, the first sign we see is hair loss. Occasionally, this is mild and starts with just a little thinning of the coat, commonly over the tail. The hair loss can start to progress over the back and eventually leave the ferret nearly bald. Along with this thinning of the hair coat, the skin may become fragile, which may result in bruising. Female ferrets can be seen to have an enlarged, swollen vulva. Males can get an enlarged prostate gland. Though an owner won't be able to see this at home, what they may recognize is the pet straining to urinate. Occasionally, this can become an emergency situation in male ferrets, particularly if the enlarged prostate is pinching off the urethra and completely blocking passage of any urine. This can lead to secondary damage to the kidneys and result in death in as little as 48 hours if not promptly treated. It is also important to note that many times a secondary infection may be present in the prostate or bladder.

Diagnosing adrenal disease is usually not too difficult and many times we are suspicious of the disease based on clinical signs. However, it is important to note that, sometimes, the signs we see can occur with other disorders. It is

important to rule out these other disorders by performing diagnostics, which can include blood work, radiographs and an ultrasound. If a secondary infection is suspected in the bladder or prostate, a culture of the urine may also be necessary.

There are a few ways to treat adrenal gland disease which include both medical and surgical therapies. Surgery involves placing the patient under anesthesia, entering the body and removing the diseased adrenal gland. It may sound simple, but it's a much more complex surgery than one might think. The glands are closely associated with some very important blood vessels in the body and, occasionally, the tumor will invade into these vessels, making a complete removal of the gland very difficult. Other times, the surgery is more straight forward. Every ferret is different and many times we do not know the real severity of the problem until looking at the glands during surgery. Surgical removal of the adrenal gland is not without risk and needs to be discussed closely with your veterinarian to determine if it would be right for your pet.

Another treatment option is medical therapy. Over the years, people have tried numerous medications but more recently we have found success with two different hormones, Lupron and Deslorelin. One of the problems with adrenal gland disease is that it causes an overproduction of several sex hormones. The hormone therapy that is initiated will suppress this overproduction of hormones and result in the resolution of clinical signs. Lupron comes as a once-monthly injection. Deslorelin is administered as an implant and lasts for about one year. Deslorelin is a new product; therefore, we are still learning exactly how well it works for patients. Many ferrets can do very well for years with hormone therapy after they have been diagnosed with adrenal gland disease. Others will begin to develop resistance to the hormone therapy and it may even stop working for them. Again, each ferret is an individual and determining which treatment modality is right for your pet will need to be discussed with your veterinarian.

Many ferrets can live for years with adrenal gland disease. As long as they are receiving regular check-ups with a veterinarian, in addition to monitoring and treatment for any secondary infections or disorders, a ferret can live a normal life span comfortably with the disease.