Addison's Disease in Ferrets

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addison's disease: symptoms, treatment, & prevention

Addison's disease, or hypoadrenocorticism, occurs when a ferret has a severe deficiency or total lack of the hormones made in the adrenal cortex. It usually occurs when both adrenal glands are removed, called a bilateral adrenalectomy, because of adrenal disease. What should you look for and how is it treated?

Signs

There are no visual signs of Addison's disease that you will be able to see until your ferret is in an Addisonian crisis. Initially, only blood work run by your veterinarian will indicate if your ferret has Addison's disease. Sodium levels will be down and potassium levels will be up. This is why it's important to closely monitor ferrets that have just had both adrenal glands removed.

If the disease is not treated, your ferret will be in an Addisonian crisis, and you may see the following signs:

- Lethargy
- Lack of appetite
- Weakness
- Difficulty walking or total inability to walk
- Seizures
- Coma
- Death

Diagnosis & Treatment

Once your veterinarian confirms Addison's disease with a blood test, he or she will generally prescribe prednisone and Percorten-V or Florinef. Prednisone can be in a pill or liquid form. Percorten is an injection that will need to be administered by a veterinarian approximately once a month. Florinef is a pill that you give your ferret once a day. These drugs will need to be administered for the rest of your ferret's life to replace the hormones that the adrenal glands can no longer produce.

During the first month or so of treatment, you will need to see a veterinarian to have blood work done every couple weeks. Blood work will determine if the medications are working and whether or not the dosages need to be increased or decreased. After that, you should plan on having your veterinarian run blood work at least once a month to make sure that your ferret's sodium and potassium are at the proper levels.

If your ferret goes into an Addisonian crisis, treatment must be immediate. Your ferret only has a very short period of time before she succumbs to the disease. Treatment includes subcutaneous fluids in mild cases and intravenous fluids in moderate or severe cases. Medications your veterinarian will administer may include prednisone or dexamethasone and Percorten-V.

We cannot stress enough how important it is to seek immediate treatment if your ferret suffers an Addisonian crisis. It is a life or death situation, and the faster you get her to a veterinarian, the more likely it is that she can survive.

Preventing Addison's Disease

Unfortunately, there is really nothing you can do to prevent this disease if both adrenal glands must be removed. However,

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Addison's disease is fairly rare in ferrets because it is very difficult to remove all adrenal tissue. The right adrenal gland lies adjacent to the biggest blood vessel in the ferret's body, the vena cava, and in many cases, some of the right adrenal tissue will remain behind. Though this may mean that the tumors will grow back, it also means that the ferret may still be able to produce enough natural hormones that replacement hormone drug therapy won't be necessary.

If you are concerned that your ferret may suffer from Addison's disease after a bilateral adrenalectomy, speak with your veterinarian about the possibility of treating your ferret's adrenal disease with Lupron rather than surgery.

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