Addison's Disease in Ferrets

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Addison's disease, or hypoadrenocorticism, is a condition which results from insufficient levels of certain hormones in the body. These hormones are produced by the adrenal glands. Addison's disease most commonly occurs in a ferret that has had both adrenal glands removed (bilateral adrenalectomy) due to adrenal disease. What are the signs of Addison's disease and how is it treated?

Clinical Signs & Diagnosis

Often times, ferrets do not show any signs of Addison's disease until they are in an Addisonian crisis. However, your veterinarian can diagnose Addison's disease before a crisis occurs by running blood tests. Your ferret's blood sodium level will be lower than normal and the potassium level will be higher than normal. Your veterinarian may also opt to run a test called an ACTH Stimulation Test to definitively diagnose Addison's disease. It is very important to monitor a ferret for the following signs after a bilateral adrenalectomy:

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

Unfortunately, once a ferret is exhibiting the signs mentioned above, the ferret is in what is known as an Addisonian crisis. An Addisonian crisis is a life-threatening emergency requiring immediate veterinary care.

Treatment

Once your veterinarian confirms the diagnosis of Addison's disease, he or she will generally prescribe prednisone and Percorten-V or Florinef. Prednisone is available in either tablet or liquid formulations. Percorten-V is an injectable medication your veterinarian will need to administer approximately once a month. Florinef is a tablet generally given once daily. These medications will need to be administered for the rest of your ferret's life to replace the missing hormones.

Initially, you will need to have your ferret examined by your veterinarian and have blood work performed on a schedule determined by your veterinarian. Blood tests will determine if the medications are effective or if the medications need to be adjusted. After your ferret's condition is stable and the blood work is normal, your veterinarian will perform blood work on a less frequent basis to make sure that the blood values remain normal.

If your ferret does not receive the medications or inadequate amounts of the medications, she may have an Addisonian crisis. Your ferret requires immediate veterinary care if this occurs, as ferrets will quickly succumb to the disease if it is not promptly and aggressively treated. Treatment includes fluid therapy, prednisone or dexamethasone, Percorten-V, and other supportive care measures.

Prevention

There is no way to prevent Addison's disease if your ferret has had a bilateral adrenalectomy. However, Addison's disease is rare in ferrets due to the fact that it is very difficult to remove all of the adrenal tissue. The right adrenal gland lies adjacent to the Caudal Vena Cava, one of the largest blood vessels in a ferret's body, and the adrenal gland may actually adhere to the vessel's wall. In these cases, some of the right adrenal tissue may remain inside the ferret's body. This tissue may produce enough hormones to prevent Addison's disease from occurring.

If your ferret is diagnosed with adrenal disease, there is an alternative to bilateral adrenalectomy as a treatment option. Adrenal disease may also be treated with a medication known as Lupron. If your ferret is diagnosed with adrenal disease, we recommend that you discuss all treatment options with your veterinarian to find the most appropriate treatment for your ferret.