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Adrenal gland disease, Hyperadrenocorticism

Cushing's disease of ferrets

Adrenal gland disease is a common problem in middle-aged to older ferrets. The disease results in one or both of the adrenal glands producing abnormal amounts of androgens and/or estrogens, which are the male and female sex hormones. This disease can cause hair loss, itching, vulvar enlargement in females, and in rare cases, severe anemia and urinary blockage.

Because adrenal gland disease can be difficult to diagnose through routine bloodwork, it is often necessary to do specialized blood tests and ultrasound examination of the abdomen to diagnose adrenal disease. Physical exam findings and clinical signs often will lead to a suspicion of adrenal gland disease. Although clinical signs such as itching and hair loss are not life threatening, a ferret's quality of life is impacted and, on rare occasions, the disease can lead to more serious complications. Treatment is best accomplished by surgery, although medical treatment is also possible.

Alopecia is usually the first and sometimes the only sign of adrenal gland disease in ferrets. It can be present on the tail, rump, ventrum, and dorsum. The hair will epilate easily and the skin can appear flaky, inflamed, and erythematous. In unusual cases, the skin may become thin. It is not uncommon for alopecia to begin in the late winter and early spring. In younger ferrets with this disease, the hair will regrow in the late summer, but then alopecia will return the next winter or spring. Pruritus can accompany the alopecia although a number of ferrets may develop just pruritus with no other signs.

The vulva is enlarged in over 90 percent of females with this disease. Vulvar enlargement may be accompanied by vulvar discharge and vaginitis. Approximately

one-third of the ferrets with adrenal gland enlargement have a palpable mass that can be felt next to the kidney. Some male ferrets will exhibit stranguria and dysuria. Older neutered ferrets may also begin to act intact and show signs of sexual aggressiveness towards other ferrets.