

Cushing's disease: signs

VETERINARY ADVICE

Kerrie Winstanley BVetMed MRCVS, of Castle Veterinary Surgeons, Barnard Castle, offers advice on Cushing's disease

RECOGNISING the symptoms of Cushing's disease in a horse, allows for it to be properly treated.

Does your horse sweat a lot? Is your horse slower than he used to be? Does he have recurrent infections or foot abscesses? Has he got or ever had laminitis? Does he drink and urinate lots? Has his coat changed? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then your horse could have Cushing's disease.

What causes Cushing's disease?

Cushing's is a common disease affecting the hormonal system of horses. It is caused by an imbalance of hormone production. Part of the brain, the hypothalamus, produces a hormone called dopamine, which is responsible for controlling the production of other hormones from the pituitary

gland, including ACTH and cortisol (stress hormone).

When the hypothalamus is not working properly, dopamine does not tell the pituitary gland to stop producing ACTH and cortisol. The high levels of cortisol cause the signs and symptoms of Cushing's disease that is seen in horses.

What signs could I see in my horse?

There are a wide range of signs. Some horses might appear completely normal to look at. All of the signs are caused by too much cortisol. The following signs can be seen:

- An abnormal hair coat, whether overgrown, delayed

shedding, curly or just very full;

- An abnormal fat distribution, bulging fat pads above the eyes or a pot-belly;

- Laminitis – Cushing's causes one-third of all laminitis cases; excessive sweating; increased appetite; increased drinking and urination;

- lethargy/laziness; poor performance; recurrent infections, such as gravel, mud fever or a snotty nose; and poor top line or muscle wastage.

But my horse is not old, it can't have Cushing's.

Historically, as a profession, we thought Cushing's disease only affected horses more than 15 years old. It is

certainly more common in older horses, but young horses can get it too.

Recent research has shown that up to a third of horses between ten and 15 years old might be affected.

How do you diagnose Cushing's?

Early identification of Cushing's helps to prevent it causing problems for your horse. There is a simple blood test to diagnose Cushing's in horses, which measures the amount of the hormone ACTH in the blood.

Even if your horse has all of the signs of Cushing's, it is important to take a blood sample so the horse can be treated appropriately. We now test every horse or pony with laminitis for Cushing's regardless of their age.

The laboratory fees to test for Cushing's disease are free until November 30, thanks to the Talk About Cushing's campaign provided by Boehringer Ingelheim Vetmedica, to improve the awareness of Cushing's disease in horses.

Is it easy to treat Cushing's?

There is a medication, per-



NORMAL LIFE: Star, a four-year-old Shetland pony, has Cushing's disease

golide, that we can give to horses to help normalise hormone production from the pituitary gland and reduce the levels of cortisol in the bloodstream. It often takes a few weeks of treatment before you will notice a difference in your horse as it takes time for the hormone levels to return to normal. A repeat blood test should be taken about six

weeks after starting treatment to ensure your horse is on the correct dose of pergolide. Although it is easy to treat, this is not a cure and is a life-long treatment.

Although we have no cure, appropriate treatment with pergolide and good routine healthcare mean your horse can go on to have a perfectly normal life.

How to create a

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