

# Hypoadrenocorticism or Addison's Disease

(Inadequate Production of Hormones by the  
Adrenal Glands)

## Basics

### OVERVIEW

- A hormonal disorder resulting from decreased production of hormones (glucocorticoids and/or mineralocorticoids) by the adrenal glands
- “Glucocorticoids” are a class of hormones produced by the adrenal glands; they typically are called “steroids”; glucocorticoids are involved in metabolism and the stress response and they have anti-inflammatory properties
- “Mineralocorticoids” are another class of hormones produced by the adrenal glands; they are involved in regulation of salt (sodium and potassium) in the body; “aldosterone” is a mineralocorticoid that regulates sodium and potassium in the body
- Addison's disease refers to decreased production of both glucocorticoids and mineralocorticoids
- Glucocorticoid (cortisol) deficiency contributes to lack of appetite (known as “anorexia”); vomiting; black, tarry stools (due to the presence of digested blood; condition known as “melena”); sluggishness (lethargy); and weight loss
- Inadequate glucocorticoid levels increase likelihood of the pet developing low blood glucose or sugar (known as “hypoglycemia”)
- Mineralocorticoid (aldosterone) deficiency results in an inability to retain sodium in the body and to excrete potassium from the body; decreased sodium levels lead to diminished circulating blood volume that in turn contributes to low blood pressure (known as “hypotension”), dehydration, weakness, and depression; increased levels of potassium in the blood (known as “hyperkalemia”) may result in heart-muscle toxicity



### GENETICS

- A genetic basis has been determined in standard poodles, bearded collies, and Leonbergers

### SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION OF PET

#### Species

- Dogs

- Cats

### **Breed Predispositions**

- Great Danes, rottweilers, Portuguese water dogs, standard poodles, bearded collies, Leonbergers, West Highland white terriers, and soft-coated wheaten terriers have increased risk as compared to other dog breeds
- No breed predisposition in cats

### **Mean Age and Range**

- Dogs—range, less than 1 year to greater than 12 years of age; median, 4 years of age
- Cats—range, 1–9 years of age; most are middle-aged

### **Predominant Sex**

- Female dogs are more likely to have hypoadrenocorticism than male dogs
- No predominant sex in cats

## **SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES IN THE PET**

- Signs vary from mild and few in some pets with long-term (chronic) low levels of steroids produced by the adrenal glands (hypoadrenocorticism) to severe and life-threatening disease in a sudden (acute) Addisonian crisis (condition in which the pet is in shock and collapse, usually with low body temperature [known as “hypothermia”], weak pulse, and an unexpectedly slow heart rate)
- Dogs—sluggishness (lethargy); lack of appetite (anorexia); vomiting; weight loss; signs vary in intensity—they may increase and decrease over time (known as a “waxing and waning” course); diarrhea; shaking; increased urination (known as “polyuria”) and increased thirst (known as “polydipsia”)
- Dogs—depression; weakness; dehydration; collapse; low body temperature (known as “hypothermia”); black, tarry stools (melena); weak pulse; slow heart rate (known as “bradycardia”); painful abdomen; hair loss
- Cats—sluggishness (lethargy); lack of appetite (anorexia); vomiting; increased urination (polyuria) and increased thirst (polydipsia); weight loss
- Cats—dehydration; weakness; weak pulse; slow heart rate (bradycardia)

## **CAUSES**

- Primary hypoadrenocorticism—unknown cause (so-called “idiopathic disease”); immune-mediated disease; side effect of medication (mitotane or trilostane) used to treat excessive production of steroids by the adrenal glands (condition known as “hyperadrenocorticism” or “Cushing's syndrome”); cancer; fungal disease; blood clotting disorder (known as “coagulopathy”)
- Secondary hypoadrenocorticism—side effect of medical treatment with steroids, when long-term steroid administration is discontinued; abnormalities in the pituitary gland; the “pituitary gland” is the master gland of the body—it is located at the base of the brain; it controls many other glands in the body

## **RISK FACTORS**

- Treatment for excessive production of steroids by the adrenal glands (hyperadrenocorticism or Cushing's disease)
- Long-term use of steroids in medical treatment

# **Treatment**

## **HEALTH CARE**

- A sudden (acute) Addisonian crisis (condition in which the pet is in shock and collapse, usually with low body temperature [hypothermia], weak pulse, and an unexpectedly slow heart rate) is a medical emergency requiring intensive hospitalization therapy
- Treatment of long-term (chronic) hypoadrenocorticism depends on severity of clinical signs; usually initial stabilization and therapy are conducted on an inpatient basis

## **ACTIVITY**

- Avoid unnecessary stress and exertion during an Addisonian crisis

## **DIET**

- No alteration necessary

## Medications

- In an Addisonian crisis (condition in which the pet is in shock and collapse, usually with low body temperature [hypothermia], weak pulse, and an unexpectedly slow heart rate), hospitalization with IV medications required for stabilization.
- Long-term (chronic) primary hypoadrenocorticism—most affected pets will need daily glucocorticoid (steroid) replacement (prednisone) as well as mineralocorticoid replacement (desoxycorticosterone pivalate or DOCP or fludrocortisone acetate)
- DOCP usually is required at monthly intervals, a few pets need injections every 3 weeks, and rare pets need injections every 2 weeks

## Follow-Up Care

### PATIENT MONITORING

- After each of the first two injections of DOCP, ideally do blood work and measure serum electrolyte (especially sodium and potassium) levels at 2, 3, and 4 weeks to determine duration of effect; thereafter, **check electrolyte levels at the time of injection for the next 3–6 months (and adjust the dosage of DOCP, if necessary) and then every 6 months**

### PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- **Continue adrenal hormone replacement therapy for the lifetime of the pet**
- Increase the dosage of replacement glucocorticoids or steroids during periods of stress (such as travel, hospitalization, and surgery), as directed by your pet's veterinarian

### POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Increased urination (polyuria) and increased thirst (polydipsia) may occur from prednisone administration, necessitating decreasing or discontinuing the drug

### EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Most affected pets carry a good to excellent prognosis following proper stabilization and treatment
- Pets with underlying tumors or cancer have less favorable prognoses

## Key Points

- **Lifelong glucocorticoid and/or mineralocorticoid replacement therapy is required**
- **Increased dosages of glucocorticoids or steroids are required during periods of stress (such as travel, hospitalization, and surgery), as directed by your pet's veterinarian**

# Notes

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