



For Pet's Sake

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ADRENAL GLAND DISEASE OF THE FERRET

Is your ferret going bald? Does it scratch constantly, but has no fleas? Does your female ferret appear as though she is in heat, but is spayed. Your ferret probably has a tumor of the adrenal gland.

The adrenal glands are small endocrine organs located along the spine just in front of the kidneys. They help regulate metabolism, electrolyte balance and kidney function.

Adrenal tumors affect a large number of ferrets. Ferrets typically range in age from 3-5 years and both sexes are equally affected. The cause of this disease is unknown, but genetic predisposition is suspected. When tumors of the adrenal gland occur, they produce excessive amounts of hormones. Symptoms include hair loss, itching, enlargement of the vulva in the females and urinary blockage in males. Though in other species, these symptoms can be associated with other endocrine abnormalities; these other diseases have not been documented in the ferret. If a ferret exhibits hair loss on the tail only, this may be part of a normal seasonal molt.

The primary method of diagnosis is observing the classic symptoms. The tumors are usually too small to feel, though it is common to be able to feel an enlarged spleen. An adrenal hormone panel can be performed to look for elevations of three different hormones. This might be performed to confirm the diagnosis in a ferret with minimal hair loss or hair loss only on the tail. Though ultrasound can be performed, the tumors are often too small to be detected. Tumors cannot be seen in an X-ray unless they are already very large.

The traditional treatment for adrenal tumors is surgery to remove the diseased gland. Tumors most often occur in the left gland which is easier to remove. Luckily, these tumors rarely metastasize. If the tumor is in the right gland, complete removal may not be possible due to the close proximity to a large blood vessel, the vena cava. Sometimes tumors are found in both glands. In addition, there may be other small pieces of adrenal tissue, separate from the main glands, which are too small to be seen that are producing hormones. For these reasons, a ferret cannot always be cured of adrenal tumors with surgery. But if caught early and there is only a tumor on the left side, surgery can cure them. It may take several months, or until the next seasonal molt, before new hair growth is seen and the itching subsides. Unfortunately, a tumor can still develop in the other gland at a later date and the symptoms will reoccur.

For young adult, healthy ferrets we recommend surgery initially. For older ferrets, ferrets with other medical problems or ferrets who have already been operated on and symptoms have returned, hormone therapy can be considered. There are several human hormone products that veterinarians are using in ferrets. Lupron is an injection that is given to ferrets monthly for at least three months in a row at first then as needed, usually every 4-6 months thereafter. Deslorelin is an implant much like a microchip that releases hormones slowly over time. They are usually injected under the ferret's skin once every 9-12 months. Neither of these products cures the disease, but rather block the action of the hormones being produced. Hopefully, in the future we will have more treatment options.

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