

Redwings Welfare Information

Redwings' Welfare Team is proactive in the promotion of equine care and welfare, believing that access to accurate and up-to-date information is vital if owners and carers are to meet the needs of their animal.

Redwings' welfare leaflets are designed to provide an overview of many important issues which are encountered regularly in welfare cases with which the Sanctuary is involved. The series includes information on the following topics:

- Laminitis
- Hoof Care and Farriery
- Worms and De-worming
- Food and Nutrition
- Behaviour
- Donkey Care
- Veteran Horses and Retirement
- Health and Happiness

To request copies of leaflets or to speak to one of the team about any equine welfare issues, please feel free to contact the department by post, phone or email.

The Welfare Team

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Incorporating Ada Cole
Memorial Stables

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Redwings Welfare

Cushings Disease



“More important than medication is the need for an owner to manage Cushings as part of the equine’s routine care. Preventative health care is particularly important because of their poor immune system.”



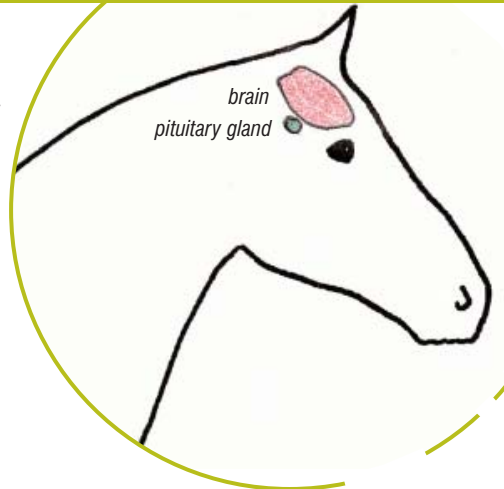
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The Charity’s purpose is to provide and promote the welfare, care and protection of horses, ponies, donkeys and mules.

Cushings disease in horses is caused by problems in the functioning of the pituitary gland situated just below the brain. This gland has several important jobs, one of which is to control the production of a hormone called cortisol. A horse with Cushings disease generally has too much cortisol in its body as a result of the condition. The disease cannot be cured and symptoms will tend to become progressively worse until such time that the horse needs to be put to sleep. With careful management, however, the disease can be controlled enough for the horse to enjoy a good quality of life for a prolonged period.

Cushings disease was named after an American brain surgeon called Harvey Cushing. He carried out extensive research into the function of the pituitary gland in humans in the early 20th century. Dr Cushing pinpointed problems that were caused by malfunctioning of the gland and the symptoms they caused. Veterinary surgeons later discovered that both horses and dogs could also suffer from similar problems with the functioning of their pituitary gland. The disease in horses is not exactly the same as in dogs or humans, so it is specifically known as 'Equine Cushings Disease' or PPID (Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction).

The pituitary gland is basically the command centre for the production of



This simple diagram of the equine head shows the location of the pituitary gland, just below the brain.

hormones within the horse's body. Hormones play an essential part in the physical and mental health of every animal and even slight increases or decreases in the levels of a single hormone can cause significant problems. The hormone cortisol has a wide range of complex functions around the body. It is crucial to temperature regulation, pain and stress relief and healing processes.

In a healthy horse the pituitary gland is sent a message when there is enough cortisol in the body and the pituitary gland then tells the adrenal gland to switch off supply until more is needed. In a horse with Cushings disease, the pituitary gland doesn't react when there is enough cortisol and so the adrenal gland keeps producing more cortisol, meaning there is more than the body needs.



This pony has a very Cushings appearance with a thick coat, even in the height of summer. The pony has been clipped down its neck and shoulders to help it stay cool.

The symptoms of Cushings are the impact of this surplus cortisol on the horse's body. These include:

- A thick, often curly coat, even in summer.
- Excessive urinating and drinking.
- Sweating. This can be caused by the thick coat, the imbalance of hormones and the pressure caused by swelling of the pituitary gland against the brain.
- Increased susceptibility to laminitis.
- Dull manner, general signs of poor health such as a stark coat.
- A less effective immune system which leaves the body more vulnerable to infection and slows down the healing process significantly.



An increase in drinking and urination is caused by the body's need to flush out the excess cortisol.

- Weight loss and muscle wastage. This may be accompanied by unusual fat distribution which can result in the appearance of a pot belly and fatty pads over the eyes.
- If the pituitary gland suffers from excessive swelling, the pressure on the brain can cause seizures or problems with vision.

Cushings Disease

The most common cause of problems with the pituitary gland is the presence of a growth or tumour on or next to the gland. A pituitary tumour in a person can be removed through surgery, but the shape of a horse's head makes successful surgery impossible. This is why the condition cannot be cured.

A vet can confirm Cushings by running a blood test. Often however, the physical symptoms and appearance of the equine are enough to enable a vet to make a confident diagnosis without the need for tests. Many people associate Cushings with the long, curly coat, but it is dangerous to assume that an equine with a 'normal' coat cannot be suffering from Cushings as the symptoms can vary enormously.

A range of medications are available to help manage Cushings by reducing the effects of the condition. They work in a variety of ways to try and redress the imbalance of hormones within the body. These drugs are notoriously expensive, however, and their effectiveness varies in each individual case. To be sure that spending large sums of money on medication is worthwhile, an owner should either be able to see a marked improvement in their equine for themselves or ask their vet to carry out tests to check whether the drugs are making a significant contribution to the horse's wellbeing. Some drugs are hard work for the horse's liver and can be damaging if the liver is not in the

best of health. Choosing treatment for a Cushings' equine should involve a detailed discussion with an experienced vet who can look at the health and history of the individual horse and give specific advice relating to the range of medications available.

More important than medication is the need for an owner to manage Cushings as part of the equine's routine care. Preventative health care is particularly important because of their poor immune system. Worming, farriery and dentistry should be carried out vigilantly and with care. Even seemingly minor problems, such as a touch of dermatitis or a snotty nose, should be diagnosed and treated as a matter of urgency.



Redwings' adoption pony Ben was diagnosed with Cushings in 2001. With careful management he is still enjoying life 6 years later.

A horse, pony or donkey with Cushings should benefit from a good quality, high fibre diet. Even if the equine has not had laminitis, they should be managed so as to reduce their chances of developing the illness. However, this needs to be balanced with maintaining body condition. A common problem faced by the owner of a Cushings animal is trying to manage an underweight equine who suffers repeated bouts of

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laminitis. It can be the impossibility of achieving an acceptable quality of life in these circumstances that leads to the need to put the animal to sleep. Seek the help of an equine vet and / or equine nutritionist to help devise the most suitable diet for an individual with Cushings.

Donkeys and Cushings

Donkeys can suffer from Cushings as well as horses and ponies. They will display some of the same variety of symptoms, but it can be more difficult to spot the most commonly recognised signal that something is wrong; the permanently thick, hairy coat. This is because healthy donkeys often have much thicker coats than horses, even in the height of summer. Knowing your donkey well and monitoring them carefully should be a natural part of their manage-



Picture courtesy of The Donkey Sanctuary

Donkeys can also develop Cushings disease. Symptoms may be harder to spot unlike the case shown above.

ment and owners need to take note of even small unexplained differences in their physique or behaviour. Seeking veterinary advice sooner rather than later will help with the early diagnosis and treatment of conditions such as Cushings.

The following may be useful sources of further information:

Redwings Horse Sanctuary

Hapton
Norwich
NR15 1SP
Horse Care and Welfare 01508 481008
General Enquiries 01508 481000
www.redwings.co.uk

The Laminitis Trust

Mead House Farm
Dauntsey
Chippenham
Wiltshire SN15 4JA
www.laminitis.org

British Equine Veterinary Association

Wakefield House
46 High Street
Sawston
Cambridge CB2 4BG
01223 836970
www.beva.org.uk

Spillers Horse Feeds

29 Old Wolverton Road
Old Wolverton
Milton Keynes
Buckinghamshire
MK12 5PZ
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01908 222888
www.spillers-feeds.com

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