

Understanding Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction (PPID)



What Is Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction (PPID)?

Pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (PPID, aka equine Cushing's disease) is a hormonal disorder that usually affects horses over 15 years old, although horses as young as 7 can develop this condition. It affects the pituitary gland in the horse's brain that releases hormones that regulate the body's functions. With PPID, the horse's pituitary gland produces an excess of a hormone called adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH). ACTH is responsible for stimulating the production of cortisol, commonly known as the "stress hormone." When cortisol production is disrupted, it can lead to a range of health issues, including the development of PPID. This common condition can affect horses of any breed.



Clinical Signs

The clinical signs of PPID develop gradually and can be subtle at first, making this condition challenging to diagnose. However, some common signs that suggest PPID include:

- Unexplained weight and/or muscle loss.
- Excessive sweating.
- A long and curly hair coat that fails to shed properly.

- Increased thirst and urination.
- Abnormal fat deposits.
- A potbellied appearance.
- Lethargy.
- Poor performance.

In addition, horses with PPID might be predisposed to infections such as foot abscesses, skin infections, and respiratory disease.



Diagnosis

Your veterinarian will first conduct a physical examination. While he or she might suspect your horse has PPID based on clinical signs, a definitive diagnosis requires laboratory testing. Blood tests can measure specific hormones produced by the pituitary gland. The most common test measures ACTH levels, which can fluctuate seasonally, so your veterinarian might need to perform multiple tests to get an accurate result. It's important to be consistent with the test and laboratory used, especially when monitoring horses over time or in response to treatment.



Treatment and Management

Pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction is a progressive condition that has no cure. Without treatment, it can lead to life-threatening complications

such as laminitis. Fortunately, we can successfully control the condition with medication and management strategies. Pergolide, the treatment of choice, can be effective in reducing hormone levels and improving clinical signs. In addition, minimizing stress, providing plenty of water and an appropriate diet, staying current on vaccinations and deworming, clipping long hair coats in summer, and ensuring proper hoof care can help manage the condition. It is important to work closely with your veterinarian to create an individualized management plan that works for your horse.



When to Call Your Vet

Contact your veterinarian:

- If you notice clinical signs of PPID in your horse, especially if your horse is older.
- For follow-up testing one month after starting pergolide.
- For follow-up testing once or twice a year to monitor disease progression and adjust pergolide dosage as needed.
- If medication and management are no longer controlling your horse's clinical signs.