

Adrenal Disease In Ferrets

Adrenal Adenoma or Adenocarcinoma

This cancer is almost as common as insulinoma and commonly occurs along with it. This is a cancer of the adrenal glands, which are very tiny organs about the size of half a pea, located near the kidneys. They produce very potent hormones that control a number of metabolic functions in the body. Most ferrets develop adenoma, which is the benign form of the disease (which means that it does not spread to other organs of the body). Adenocarcinoma is the malignant form that we see less commonly. Many ferrets develop the cancer in only the left gland. Signs are fairly specific and they are related to an overproduction of corticosteroids and estrogen by the diseased adrenal. They include: hair loss over a portion or all of the body, a decrease in coat quality (becomes dry and brittle), thinning of the skin, thinning of the musculature of the body, lethargy, and occasionally drinking more water and urinating more frequently. The hair loss may be intermittent, with periods of regrowth. The skin may become intensely itchy and develop red patches, scaling and flaking. Fat tends to accumulate in the abdomen and combined with the thinning musculature and skin, gives a pot-bellied appearance to the animal. Some spayed females may develop vulvar swelling as if they were in heat again. Diagnosis is based primarily on the signs as described above.

Treatment of choice is the removal of the affected adrenal gland. However, sometimes the disease is advanced, and both adrenals are affected or other disease precludes the possibility of surgery. In these cases the use of a drug called Lysodren [also known as mitotane] . It chemically destroys the adrenal tissue gradually until a more normal hormone level is reached and the symptoms regress. Even if no treatment is elected for specific reasons, this tends to be a slowly progressive disease, and many pets live 6 months to over 2 years, bald, but happy.

