

## Equine Cushing's Disease: What You need to know

Cushing's disease causes a hormonal imbalance and is most frequently seen in older horses (usually over 15 years of age). The hormonal imbalance causes many symptoms including:

- Poor hair coat which is slow to shed and which may be also long and curly;
- Laminitis;
- Depression/lethargy;
- Wasting of the top line/poor condition;
- "Pot bellied" appearance;
- Increased thirst and urination; and
- Chronic infections (often sinusitis causing a runny nose).



Not all horses with Cushing's will show all symptoms and there can be a huge variation in how affected horses look. In the past some of these signs including lethargy and loss of top-line were put down to 'normal' slowing down associated with age, however we now know that in many cases the "slowing down" is in fact Cushing's disease and once treatment has started owners report their horse having a new lease of life!

The most severe and potentially life threatening aspect of Cushing's disease is laminitis. Poorly controlled laminitis is the most common reason we have to put these horses to sleep. Recent research has found that a very high proportion (up to 80%) of what was traditionally diagnosed as "grass associated laminitis" is actually caused by an underlying hormonal imbalance, the most common of which in older horses is Cushing's disease. So if we can diagnose and start treatment for Cushing's early then we can much more easily control the laminitis.

The other key point from recent research is that Cushing's is a disease associated with increasing age. A study has found 20% of horses aged over 15 years of age will have Cushing's disease, and the risk of Cushing's increases sharply with each increasing years so that over 80% of horse over the age of 25 will have some degree of Cushing's disease. As our horses and ponies are leading increasingly active lives well into their twenties and thirties it's important that we do our utmost to maintain their health and wellbeing into their geriatric years.

### Treatment

Unfortunately there is no cure for Cushing's disease but we can manage the disease with a medication called Prascend which is the treatment of choice for Cushing's. There is little good evidence to suggest that any of the alternative supplements have a significantly positive effect on your horse.

Prascend contains the active ingredient pergolide. It can take up to 6-12 weeks before you notice the effects of the Prascend.

Getting the correct levels of the drug to ensure good control of the Cushing's without increasing the risk of side effects can be difficult. Best medicine principles would suggest re-testing the blood for ACTH levels at frequent intervals. While this is not mandatory it is very useful in ensuring we have your horse on the correct dose.

We will advise you on how many tablets to give your horse and it is usually given once daily. Most horses and ponies are happy to take the tablet in an apple or carrot, or disguised with some molasses.

Side effects are rarely seen with Prascend. The most common side effect is a reduced appetite and occasionally horses will go off their feed all together. If you notice this give us a call to discuss the case, as it's likely we will alter the Prascend dose.





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### Cost of Treatment

Cost will depend upon the weight of the horse, the dose being used and the current price of pergolide. At present (2012) the average cost for a horse works out at just over a pound a day. For smaller ponies this is approximately half the price.

### What are the Benefits of Treatment?

With treatment most horses will benefit from improved health and welfare. They will often maintain their weight better on less feed, show improved resistance to infections and a lessening of laminitic bouts. Our older horses and ponies have been treasured members of the family for a long period of time, so any treatment which improves their welfare and demeanor must be considered positive. Overall once started on Prascend the cost of treatment can be offset against the savings in other veterinary treatments and the more efficient use of their feed.

### Extra Care

Most horses diagnosed with Cushing's will be over 15 years of age, and are likely to require some extra TLC. Managing their Cushing's disease successfully also relies upon good husbandry, in particular with regards to farriery (vital for laminitics), dentistry, diet and worming.

Unfortunately horses with Cushing's disease are prone to picking up infections and may not heal as well as normal ponies. Keeping an extra close eye on any small scrape, cut or runny nose is to be recommended.

Because some of these horses may be in poor body condition extra attention to routine dentistry is important. This is best performed by your veterinary surgeon who can tie this in with nutrition and geriatric medicine to give a more holistic approach to your horse's care.

If you have any further questions please give us a call and we can discuss your horse's individual needs.