



Horse Health:

Cushing's Disease (PPID)

What is it?

Equine Cushing's Disease, more accurately known as **Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction (PPID)**, is one of the most common hormonal disorders affecting older horses.

While it's often considered a normal part of ageing, PPID is a medical condition that can significantly impact your horse's health and quality of life. The good news? With proper management, horses with PPID can live long, happy lives.

What causes it?

PPID is primarily caused by age-related degeneration of the nerves in the brain that control the pituitary gland. This degeneration leads to a loss of dopamine, which normally keeps the gland in check. As a result, the pituitary gland becomes overactive and produces excessive amounts of hormones - especially **adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH)**.

This overproduction of ACTH stimulates the adrenal glands to release excessive **cortisol**, a stress hormone that affects metabolism, immune function, and many other systems in the body.

While age is the main risk factor, PPID is not exclusive to older horses. Although most cases occur in horses over 15, it can occasionally be seen in horses as young as 10.

What horses are at risk?

- **Older horses** (especially over 15 years of age)
- Horses with a **history of laminitis**
- Horses with **Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS)** - a condition that can coexist with PPID
- Horses showing signs of **muscle loss, coat changes, or unexplained weight loss**

Both mares and geldings are equally affected. While PPID is more common in older horses, it's important to remember that not all ageing horses will develop the disease.

What are the symptoms?

PPID can present with a wide range of symptoms, which may vary in severity.

Common signs include:

- A long or curling coat (also known as **hypertrichosis**) that doesn't shed properly)
- **Changes in coat colour**, often turning coppery
- **Muscle wastage**, especially along the topline
- **Pot-bellied appearance**
- **Lethargy and depression**
- **Excessive drinking and urination**
- **Increased sweating**
- **Bulging around the eyes**
- **Recurrent infections** (e.g., skin, dental, or respiratory)
- **Weight loss** despite good appetite
- **Laminitis**, often the first noticeable sign

In fact, many horses are diagnosed with PPID after an episode of laminitis, which prompts further investigation.

How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis is typically made through a blood test that measures the level of **ACTH** in the bloodstream. Elevated ACTH levels are a strong indicator of PPID.

In some cases, especially if results are borderline or inconsistent, your vet may recommend a **TRH stimulation test** to confirm the diagnosis.

It's important to note that ACTH levels can fluctuate with the seasons, so your vet will consider the time of year and your horse's clinical signs when interpreting results.

How can it be treated or managed?

While PPID is **not curable**, it is **very manageable** with the right approach.

Medication

The mainstay of treatment is **pergolide**, a medication that helps regulate the pituitary gland and reduce hormone production. It's usually given daily and is well tolerated by most horses.

Some horses may experience a temporary loss of appetite when starting pergolide, but this often resolves within a week. If not, your vet may adjust the dose.

Monitoring

Regular monitoring is essential to ensure the treatment is effective. Vets typically recommend:

- Re-testing ACTH levels 6 weeks after starting treatment

- Routine check-ups and repeat blood tests every 6–12 months
- Monitoring for changes in clinical signs

Management

- Clip long coats to keep your horse comfortable
- Maintain good hoof care, especially if there's a history of laminitis
- Monitor weight and body condition
- Provide a low-sugar, high-fibre diet
- Keep up with vaccinations, dental care, and parasite control

Can it be prevented?

Unfortunately, PPID cannot be prevented, as it is primarily caused by ageing - a natural and unavoidable process. However, early detection and proactive management can significantly improve your horse's quality of life.

If your horse is over 15, it's a good idea to:

- **Watch for early signs** of PPID
- **Discuss routine screening** with your vet
- **Act quickly** if you notice changes in coat, weight, or behaviour

Early treatment may help slow the progression of the disease and reduce the risk of complications like laminitis.

If you suspect your horse may have PPID - or if they've had an unexplained bout of laminitis - it's worth speaking to your vet about testing. Early diagnosis and treatment can make all the difference. With the right care, medication, and monitoring, horses with PPID can continue to live long, active, comfortable lives.