

Addison's disease (Hypoadrenocorticism) – Client Fact Sheet

Addison's disease, or hypoadrenocorticism, is a potentially life-threatening disease caused by inadequate levels of hormones produced by the adrenal glands. The adrenal glands produce two types of hormones that are critical for life: glucocorticoids (cortisol) and mineralocorticoids (aldosterone). These hormones are vital for the normal function of almost every cell in the body, the immune system, electrolytes and water balance in the body.

What are the signs and symptoms of Addison's disease?

Signs vary. Some patients have low grade, waxing and waning vomiting and diarrhoea. Some present as an emergency when they experience an 'Addisonian crisis'. This is when the deficiencies of these hormones cause severe electrolyte abnormalities (e.g. increased potassium, decreased sodium or glucose), marked dehydration and weakness.

How is Addison's disease treated?

An Addisonian crisis is treated with intravenous fluids and replacement of these essential hormones. The medications (Zycortal and prednisolone) need to be administered life-long as without them a life-threatening Addisonian crisis could develop. Some dogs only lack one of these hormones, usually cortisol, and thus only need glucocorticoid supplementation. We call this 'atypical Addison's disease'.

The doses of these medications will likely to be adjusted over time. Frequent blood tests are initially required to ensure the dose of medications is correct and the disease is well-controlled. During periods of stress (for example, due to going to boarding kennels or because of other illness), the individual's requirement for prednisolone is likely to increase. Please contact us ahead of time to discuss how best to manage stressful situations.

Zycortal (desoxycorticosterone pivalate or DOCP, the mineralocorticoid) is an injection that is usually given every 28 days by your vet. The dose is adjusted based on blood tests performed at set time points:

1. A blood test is performed 10 days after the injection as this is when the drug has its peak effect.
2. A blood test is performed at 28 days and the next dose of Zycortal is given.

Once the right dose of Zycortal has been established, the frequency of blood monitoring will be reduced unless there are clinical concerns. No Zycortal is required for 'atypical Addison's disease' patients.

What are the signs that could indicate the dose is too high?

If the dose of prednisolone is too high, you might observe increased thirst, urination and appetite, muscle loss and hair coat changes.

If the dose of Zycortal is too high, you might observe increased thirst and urination, poor appetite and depression/weakness. Please contact your vet if you detect any of these signs.

What is the prognosis for dogs with Addison's disease?

The prognosis for dogs with Addison's disease is usually very good if the disease is well managed and the patient monitored appropriately.