



Springhill Large Animal Veterinarians
12717 NW 39th Avenue
Gainesville, FL 32606

Ofc: 352.331.8434 Fax: 352.332.6552
Dr. Randy Emmons Dr. Erica Lacher
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So the Old Grey Nag, She ain't what she used to be? Is she having trouble maintaining weight? Slow to shed out her winter coat if at all? Just generally ain't doin' right? Then she should be checked for Cushing's disease.

Cushing's disease is commonly seen in older (over 16-17 years) horses of all breeds and is caused by an increase in the size and production capacity of the pituitary gland. This gland is responsible for making many of the hormones responsible for maintaining the normal balance of the body's systems. So when hormone levels go up the body's systems go awry.

The most common symptoms of Cushing's include a long, fine haircoat that fails to shed in summer and mild to moderate laminitis (or founder). Many horses will also begin to have problems maintaining weight and become more susceptible to infections.

If we suspect Cushing's disease, the first step is a thorough physical exam to fully identify any problems. Following this a Low Dose Dexamethasone Suppression (LDDS) test is recommended. This test involves drawing blood to test Cortisol levels followed by administration of dexamethasone with a second blood draw for Cortisol levels 24 hours later. In normal horses dexamethasone will lower Cortisol levels. However, Cushing's horses will often either remain the same or increase.

If your horse's Cortisol levels do not respond appropriately we will begin treatment. Currently two treatments are available: Pergolide and Cyproheptidine. Cyproheptidine is a serotonin antagonist while Pergolide is a dopamine agonist. In general, Pergolide gives better results though many horses will respond favorably to Cyproheptidine. Both medications are given daily in your horse's feed as an apple flavored powder.

Along with medications, dietary changes are very important. Cushing's disease interferes with the body's ability to manage carbohydrates effectively. Therefore, we recommend changing to a lower starch diet such as Seminole's Happy Hoof, HDF or Horse and Pony Pellets. Soaking hay for 30-45 minutes then pouring off the water will help reduce the carbohydrates in the hay. These horses may also have problems digesting the seed heads seen on Bahia in the summer. If your horse shows mild foot soreness once these seed heads appear, we recommend the use of a grazing muzzle to decrease grass intake.

In summary, Cushing's disease is an important problem for older horses. With medication and careful management of their health, most horses do very well. If you suspect your horse has Cushing's or have questions about your Cushing's diagnosed horse, please feel free to call us.