



Ness Exotic Wellness Center
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ADRENAL DISEASE

The adrenal glands have been the site of neoplasia (cancer) in ferrets for many years. Both adrenal glands are subject to hormone-stimulated neoplasia. The adrenal glands and the pancreas (Insulinoma) are both major parts of the endocrine system in the body and both Adrenal disease and Insulinoma in ferrets tend to go together. (To read further about Insulinoma please see our hand out.)

The left and right adrenal glands are situated above each respective kidney and are usually embedded in fat. The left adrenal is found close to the left side of the abdominal aorta and caudal (behind) to the origin of the cranial mesenteric artery. The right adrenal gland is longer and is in a more dangerous position in relation to surgery. The right adrenal lies close to the point of origin of the cranial mesenteric artery and ventrally (above) the caudal vena cava. The anatomical placing of these organs makes this a very delicate surgery.

These glands in ferrets for some reason become diseased and increase in size to the point where they put pressure on the kidneys or the vena cava. They also can produce an excessive amount of androgens or sex hormones in the ferret. This overproduction of androgens results in many different clinical signs such as hair loss (alopecia) starting on the tail creeping up along their hindquarters, enlargement of the vulva in spayed females, vaginitis or stump pyometra in spayed females, neutered males mounting spayed females, neutered males being aggressive to other males, enlargement of the prostate gland in males which can reflect as the ferret straining to urinate (stranguria), an increase in body odor, dry-brittle hair coat, and pruritus; itchier than usual skin. The diagnosis of Adrenal Disease is usually based upon the clinical signs and medical history.

The speculation amongst veterinarians is that the early sterilization, the unnatural photoperiods (living under artificial light), inbreeding and poor genetics are predisposing pet ferrets to adrenal disease. American ferrets, the ones we purchase at a pet store, are sterilized at 6 weeks of age when ideally ferrets should be sterilized at 6 – 9 months of age.

Treatment for adrenal disease can be surgery to remove a portion or all of the adrenal gland, hormone injections, herbal and homeopathic treatments.