

Diagnosing Adrenal Gland Disease

What is the best method for diagnosing adrenal gland disease for ferrets?

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Q: I have a 5-year-old, neutered male ferret. Over the last two months he has lost hair on his back. He eats and everything else is normal. My husband took him to our vet, who has treated several of my ferrets and other pets. The vet suggested that we could be looking at adrenal disease. We had another male ferret that had to have surgery three years ago for the same thing. Our vet also suggested that we could have some blood work done or have someone do a sonogram to verify the tumor(s). Both quotes were very expensive. Is one method better than the other and less stressful to my ferret?

A: Adrenal gland disease is common in ferrets, so it is not surprising to have it occur in another ferret. In most cases, adrenal gland disease is diagnosed just by signs and the age of the ferret. An older ferret that loses hair but is otherwise normal likely has adrenal gland disease. A simple skin test for mites can rule out mite infection, but skin mites causing hair loss are rare in ferrets. Your veterinarian did the right thing by suggesting a couple of different tests to confirm the diagnosis of adrenal gland disease.

Both tests, the blood test and the ultrasound of the abdomen, have a lot of merit. Each test has its positives and negatives. The blood test is very specific for adrenal gland disease and, if it is positive, your ferret has adrenal gland disease. Most of the time the test is positive when adrenal gland disease is present. In rare cases, the test is negative even though the ferret has the disease. The same is true for the ultrasound (sonogram). Most times when a ferret has an abnormal adrenal gland, the test is positive. Occasionally, however, a ferret with adrenal gland disease tests negative on the ultrasound.

Some doctors would say that your ferret most likely has adrenal gland disease based on the signs. If money is an issue, you might be better off spending the money on treatment rather than diagnostic testing. There are risks to this, but it is a reality today that we cannot always do everything we want for our pets due to costs. Only you can decide where your money is best spent.