

Ferret Adrenal Gland Disease

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Adrenal disease is a common problem in the ferret. An adrenal gland, found at the tip of each kidney, normally produces hormones that keep the body in homeostatic balance. When an adrenal gland becomes diseased, it typically enlarges and produces hormones in much larger quantities than normal.

Alopecia (hair loss) is usually the first and sometimes the only sign of adrenal gland disease. Alopecia commonly affects the tail, rump, belly and back. The hair is easily pulled out, and the skin can appear flaky and red. These ferrets may also experience severe itching. More than 90 percent of female ferrets with adrenal gland disease develop an enlarged vulva, which may be accompanied by discharge. Most ferrets develop signs of this disease in young middle age (about 3 years old).

Your veterinarian can use many procedures to diagnose this disease. A patient history and physical examination are the first important steps. Your veterinarian will ask questions about your ferret's health and activities. Basic blood tests can't diagnose this disease but can help your vet assess the ferret's general health. A special blood test that measure the hormones produced by the adrenal glands will help diagnose this disease in ferrets. An abdominal sonogram can help, too.

Presently, surgery is the best treatment for adrenal gland disease. Before removing the adrenal gland, your vet will examine the entire abdomen. If both adrenal glands are abnormal, the vet will remove the larger adrenal gland and will biopsy part of the other adrenal gland.

Recovery from surgery is normally uncomplicated. Many times, surgery cures this disease, and the ferret lives the rest of its life free of adrenal gland problems.