

Dear Dr. Wise: We noticed that our dog Charley's stomach seemed swollen and took him to the veterinarian. She gave him several tests and finally determined that he had a disease called Cushing's. I do not fully understand her explanation, but gather it has something to do with the adrenal gland. Can you give me more information? How serious is it?

Answer: Canine Cushing's Syndrome (CCS) is a serious and complex condition in which the adrenal glands overproduce. Humans can have the same problem. In most cases, the disease responds well to treatment.

With CCS the adrenal glands, which are located beside each kidney, produce too much cortisol hormone. The condition is triggered either by a tumor of the adrenal glands or a problem in the pituitary gland.

Increased fat in the abdomen caused Charley's potbellied appearance. Other signs of the disease are excessive drinking and urinating, increased appetite, muscle weakness, lethargy and hair loss (sometimes over the entire body).

These same signs are common to other problems. Increased thirst and urination, for example, can indicate diabetes, kidney disease and liver disease as well as CCS. The veterinarian's tests were to make sure Charley's problems were caused by Cushing's.

Most often, CCS is caused by a tumor in the pituitary gland. It is located in the brain but sends messages to the adrenal glands telling them when to produce the cortisol. With CCS, the pituitary gland sends constant messages causing overproduction of the hormone.

If the tumor is on the adrenal glands, the situation is more complicated. Two types of tumors can be the source of the problem. Since one possibility is a cancerous tumor which can metastasize, additional testing (such as ultrasound, CT scans, Gamma camera imaging) may be needed to show the extent of the problem. If the tumor has not metastasized, surgery often is effective.

If you have a question about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Ave., Suite 405, Indianapolis, IN 46225.