

Tamera, Cushings Disease and Pergolide

By Claire C. Cox-Wilson



An 8 year-old Tamera in 1984

Her owner could no longer afford to feed her and was keeping her in a fenced-in section of desert with a group of cows. The desert vegetation offered very little in the way of food. The four-year-old bay mare was very thin and her hooves were a mess. I looked into those big brown eyes and was totally suckered in; I could not turn my back on her. Twenty-seven years later, Tamera is still a part of my life. However, in January of 2000, my dearest equine friend was diagnosed with Equine Cushings Disease.

Equine Cushings disease also known as pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (PPID), is most common in older horses (20 or older), but can strike in the early to mid teens. The disease is caused by a loss of brain neurons producing the chemical dopamine. This in turn leads to overproduction of many hormones, including high levels of ACTH, stimulating cortisol production by the adrenal glands. The drug pergolide substitutes for the lost dopamine. Horses are very sensitive to the drug, and do not appear to suffer the same side effects as humans, possibly because of the low doses used. In the early stages of PPID some horses respond favorably to the chastetree berry herb. However, eventually the herb loses its effect and pergolide is required to manage the symptoms of this disease. There is no other medication available at this time that is as effective as pergolide to treat these horses.

The Common Symptoms of Cushings (PPID) are:

- Sudden-onset of polydipsia. An affected horse may drink as much as 80 liters of water a day (as opposed to an average 20 – 30 liters). This is accompanied by polyuria (frequent urination)
- Abnormal hair growth and shedding. Affected horses may develop a growth of heavy, coarse, often curly hair, which does not shed in the summer. This is usually accompanied by sweating
- Development of a swayback stance and a pot belly
- Filling above the eyes caused by the deposition of fat
- A general appearance of malaise, depression, with dull eyes and drab coat
- Increased appetite (usually with no accompanying weight gain)
- Chronic laminitis (inflammation of the lamina of the hooves, can cause coffin bone to rotate, commonly referred to as founder)
- Loss of muscle over the topline
- Compromised immune system. This makes the horse susceptible to a myriad of conditions/diseases which are often passed off as old age. These include respiratory disease, skin infections, abscesses of the foot, buccal ulcers, and periodontal disease

Managing Cushings

- Avoiding stressing the horse. The hormonal profile of many horses with Cushing's already indicates high stress levels, so reducing stress is critical
- Providing a safe, comfortable "sanctuary" for the horse
- Sticking to a strict routine, which will help minimize stress
- Keeping water and feed conveniently located and in the same place
- Clipping the horse in warm weather; using blankets when it is cold
- Keeping up grooming to minimize skin diseases
- Maintaining good hoofcare
- Checking teeth regularly and having them checked by a professional twice a year
- Avoiding turning the horse out with aggressive horses
- Avoiding contact with horses from a new location
- Keeping immunizations to a minimum/ making sure all necessary shots are given
- Deworming regularly
- Providing an appropriate diet for the horse. This usually involves elimination of simple carbohydrates



Tamera (24 years old) in 2000 before treating with pergolide

In 2000, shortly after her diagnosis Tamera was treated with cyproheptadine. Unfortunately, it was while on this medication that Tamera came down with her first and only case of laminitis, an extremely painful and crippling hoof disease. It was then that we discontinued the cyproheptadine and started Tamera on the drug pergolide.

Tamera has been on pergolide for almost seven years with no ill effects. This drug has kept Tamera's cushing symptoms under control so that she can still enjoy her retired life.

It would be tragic to have to end that life because of the unavailability of the drug pergolide.

Pergolide Withdrawal by FDA

On March 29, 2007, the FDA announced withdrawal of the drug pergolide mesylate. Recent studies discovered cardiac valvular abnormalities in up to 22% of human Parkinson Disease patients on the drug. There are other options for people; not so for thousands of horses that depend on this drug to control equine Cushings Disease/PPID.

When news of the withdrawal was made public, well-known equine nutritionist and author Dr. Eleanor Kellon and members of the Equine Cushings and Insulin Resistance group <http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/EquineCushings/>, researched the implication. Dr. Kellon established contact with drug wholesalers and the defunct pill manufactures to educate them as to the ongoing need. A dialog was established with the FDA and an on-line petition was set-up, <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/savepergolide/index.html>. At the time of this writing, this petition has already generated over 3400 signatures.

Time is running out for these horses. Compounding pharmacies are raising their prices as they deal with shortage of the pergolide bulk powder. All horseowners should be aware of the implications the unavailability of this drug has on their ageing horses. Any horse could develop Cushings disease.

Interested parties are encouraged to sign the on-line petition and contact the FDA at 1-888-463-6332.

Please do not allow our equine friends to suffer unnecessarily or worse yet, have to be euthanized because the FDA won't act and make this drug available for veterinary use.



March of 2007, Tamera (31 years old) plays with her friends Sumer & Freddie

About the author:

Claire Cox-Wilson has rehabilitated her gelding Doc from Navicular syndrome and has kept his symptoms of PSSM/EPSSM at bay.

Cox-Wilson has also kept her 31-year-old mare Tamera, going strong, in spite of Cushings disease and Insulin Resistance.

Claire retired in 2002 from a nursing career that spanned 32 years.

Now, she cares for her animals, makes custom horse hair dreamcatchers and sells herbal mixes for horses. She can be contacted through her websites:

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