

# Understanding Addison's Disease in Dogs

**Addison's disease**, also known as **hypoadrenocorticism**, is an uncommon but serious condition that affects a dog's adrenal glands. While it can sound intimidating, the good news is that with the right treatment and monitoring, dogs with Addison's disease can live long, happy, and active lives.

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## What Is Addison's Disease?

Inside your dog's body are two small adrenal glands located near the kidneys. These glands produce important hormones — primarily **cortisol** and **aldosterone** — that help regulate many vital functions, including stress response, blood pressure, and the balance of water and electrolytes (sodium and potassium).

In dogs with Addison's disease, the adrenal glands don't produce enough of these hormones. As a result, the body can't properly manage stress or maintain normal fluid and electrolyte balance. This hormonal imbalance can make dogs very sick if left untreated.

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## What Causes Addison's Disease?

Most cases of Addison's disease are **immune-mediated**, meaning the dog's own immune system mistakenly attacks the adrenal glands. In other cases, it may be caused by:

- Certain medications (especially long-term steroid use that's stopped suddenly)
- Infection, trauma, or cancer affecting the adrenal glands

Addison's disease can occur in any breed or age, but it's more common in **young to middle-aged female dogs** and certain breeds such as **Poodles, Portuguese Water Dogs, Bearded Collies, and West Highland White Terriers**.

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## Signs and Symptoms

Addison's disease is often called "the great pretender" because its symptoms can look like many other conditions. Signs can range from mild to life-threatening, and they may come and go over time.

### Common symptoms include:

- Lethargy or weakness
- Loss of appetite
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- Weight loss
- Shaking or trembling
- Increased thirst or urination
- Collapse or severe dehydration (in an “Addisonian crisis”)

An **Addisonian crisis** is a medical emergency. Dogs may collapse, have a very slow heart rate, low blood pressure, and go into shock. Immediate veterinary care is critical.

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### How Is Addison’s Disease Diagnosed?

Because the symptoms are vague, your veterinarian may recommend blood tests to look for changes in electrolytes (especially **low sodium and high potassium** levels) or low cortisol levels. If Addison’s disease is suspected, the next step is an **ACTH stimulation test**, which measures how well the adrenal glands respond to stimulation. This is the gold standard for diagnosis.

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### Treatment and Management

Addison’s disease is a **lifelong condition**, but once diagnosed, it can be managed successfully with daily or monthly medication.

Treatment typically includes:

- **Hormone replacement therapy:** To replace the missing adrenal hormones. This may involve:
  - A **daily oral medication** (fludrocortisone), or

- **A monthly injection** (DOCP)
- **Cortisol supplementation:** Sometimes dogs also need low-dose steroids (like prednisone), especially during times of stress or illness.

Your veterinarian will work with you to find the right medication type and dosage, along with regular bloodwork to monitor your dog's electrolytes and adjust treatment as needed.

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## **Living with Addison's Disease**

Once stabilized, most dogs with Addison's disease can live completely normal, active lives. Owners play a key role in their pet's health by:

- Giving medications consistently
- Scheduling regular checkups and lab tests
- Watching for early signs of stress, illness, or medication imbalance

With a little extra attention and care, dogs with Addison's disease often go on to enjoy many happy, healthy years.

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## **When to Call Your Veterinarian**

Contact your veterinarian if your dog:

- Seems unusually tired or weak
- Stops eating or starts vomiting
- Has diarrhea lasting more than a day
- Collapses or seems unable to stand

Quick action can make a big difference, especially in preventing a crisis.

While Addison's disease can be a frightening diagnosis, it's one that modern veterinary medicine manages very well. With proper treatment and regular monitoring, most dogs respond beautifully and continue to live full, joyful lives. If you ever have questions or concerns about

your dog's health, our team at Benson View Veterinary Hospital is here to help every step of the way.