ADRENAL DISEASE

90% of ferrets six years old will have adrenal disease. A tumor grows on the adrenal gland, causing it to change how hormones are used or released into the body.

The first symptom is often thinning fur, especially on the tail or at the shoulders. Other symptoms are weight loss, inability to gain weight, pot belly, muscle wasting, enlarged nipples, aggression, especially toward other ferrets, itching more than normal, for females - enlarged vulva and anemia, and for males - increased odor and difficulty urinating (swollen prostate-dribbling, straining, pain when urinating). The tumors are usually non-cancerous, but can become cancerous if not treated. If not taken care of, the ferret will get more and more uncomfortable over time and eventually have a painful death.

There are four forms of treatment – melatonin, Suprelorin (Des) implants, Lupron, and surgery.  My recommendation is to always start out with the lowest form of treatment (melatonin) and then go to the other forms.  Each form of treatment will only help for so long, so the sooner you start one form of treatment, the sooner it will stop working.

Melatonin can be given as a supplement or an implant. The liquid supplement should be given daily seven to nine hours after sunrise to mimic the body's natural output. The implant is a small plastic piece injected under the skin like a microchip. This gives off medication every day that treats the symptoms.  Most believe it does not slow the progress of the disease.  (I have used this treatment for years and have seen no difference between using it and the Suprelorin, until the later stages of the disease.)  It lasts four to six months. If given regularly at a young age, many people believe it can help prevent adrenal disease. Most ferrets respond to this implant. ($48)

A Suprelorin (Des) implant is a hardened medication that is injected under the skin like a microchip. It gives off medication daily. The implant lasts 12-14 months. It slows the progress of the adrenal disease and treats the symptoms. Many people believe it prevents adrenal disease or greatly delays the symptoms. ($200 + vet visit at most vets)

A Lupron injection or implant lasts three to four months. It starts working faster than melatonin or Des implants and is good at stopping symptoms and slowing the progress of the disease. It works on most ferrets. It is expensive and can be difficult to find a vet that has it.

If the ferret is otherwise healthy, adrenal surgery can be done. It’s preferred to do surgery after five years old. Surgery removes the left adrenal gland, so the problem is removed until the right adrenal gland becomes affected. It is still recommended to continue treatment for adrenal disease to keep the right adrenal gland from being affected or to slow down the progress of the disease if it is affected.

If the right adrenal gland is affected, most vets cannot remove it. The vena cava artery surrounds the right gland and it's very complicated and dangerous to do the surgery. There's a 75% chance the left gland is affected. Having an ultrasound done before the surgery is always the best thing to do. This determines which gland is affected and if there are any other major issues that may prevent surgery.

Once the left adrenal gland is removed, the right adrenal gland has to work harder. This increases the chance of it getting adrenal disease. That's one of the reasons for waiting to do adrenal surgery until they're closer to five years old, unless the symptoms warrant doing surgery sooner.

These are pics of ferrets in various stages of adrenal disease and a picture of where the adrenal glands are located.