

Dr. Ernie Ward, DVM

Ernie has more than 20 years of experience in the veterinary industry and is a well-known veterinarian, media personality and author. He is also a founding member of IDEXX's Pet Health Network team.

For more from [Dr. Ernie Ward](#), visit www.DrErnieWard.com or on [Facebook](#).

In 1912 a brilliant neurosurgeon, Dr. Harvey Cushing, reported an unusual case of a young lady with what he termed "polyglandular syndrome." Cushing wasn't sure what was wrong with the poor patient, only that he suspected "several glands" were secreting too much of "something." It would take twenty years to identify that "something" as a basophil adenoma of the pituitary body causing hyperadrenocorticism. We commonly refer to this common and complex hormonal disease of people and dogs as "[Cushing's disease](#)." A [recent discovery](#) may allow future veterinarians to quickly screen for this disease by simply taking a hair sample from suspected dogs.

Cushing's disease typically occurs in older canines. The most common symptoms include increased thirst and urination, excessive appetite, thinning and loss of hair, and a pot-bellied appearance. Because these clinical signs may accompany many diseases, veterinarians and pet parents may delay testing or mistake Cushing's disease for something else, resulting in late diagnosis and less than optimal treatments. Testing for Cushing's disease is complicated, time-consuming, and costly, further challenging prompt recognition. Veterinarians need a quick, reliable, and inexpensive alternative. Scientists in Vienna may have found a solution.

Cushing's disease causes most of its damage by increasing the body's production of natural steroids, especially glucocorticoids. Too much of these steroids for too long can lead to serious complications and death. Researchers at the University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna proved these glucocorticoids accumulate in an affected dog's hair and that analysis can provide rapid and reliable preliminary diagnosis of Cushing's disease. The veterinary scientists compared levels of the three main steroids in the hair of healthy

dogs with those suffering from Cushing's disease. The results verified that all three hormones, cortisol, corticosterone, and cortisone, were found in significantly elevated levels in the hair of Cushingoid dogs. Most importantly, cortisol was found to be particularly elevated, making that specific hormone a likely candidate for future tests.

Many of us have long speculated that hair could be used to diagnose many illnesses in pets. This research validates that suspicion. My hope is that diagnostic laboratories will begin exploring ways to make this type of testing a reality for veterinarians and our pet patients. I long for the day when I'll simply be able to take a few hairs and accurately assess my patient's health status. Studies like this bring my dream closer every day. One day the key to analyzing your pet may be found in the hair we vacuum from our floors each day.

If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian - they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.

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