

Understanding cortisol in dogs

Cortisol often comes up when people discuss stress in dogs. It is part of normal physiology, but it is not a behaviour label and it is not something we can measure by watching a dog bark, yawn or run around.

For an owner, the useful starting point is simpler: what is your dog finding difficult, what has changed, and what would help them feel safer or more comfortable?

What is cortisol?

Cortisol is a hormone produced by the adrenal glands. It has normal roles in the body and participates in the stress response. It should not be described as a pleasurable “natural high”, or treated as something a dog should never produce.

A dog can be excited, worried, tired or uncomfortable for different reasons. Their behaviour deserves attention without assuming it tells us a particular hormone level.

Behaviour does not diagnose a hormone problem

A dog who looks calm has not thereby demonstrated a “healthy cortisol balance”. Equally, panting, shedding, barking or difficulty settling does not establish excessive cortisol. Observe the pattern and the surrounding circumstances, and speak with your vet when health concerns arise.

Medical conditions involving abnormal cortisol production need veterinary assessment. Cushing syndrome is associated with excessive cortisol and may cause changes such as increased drinking and urination, appetite changes, panting and skin or coat changes. Those signs can have other causes. Your vet uses the history, examination and appropriate tests to assess them.

Make the everyday situation easier

If your dog becomes worried around a particular trigger, create space where it is safe to do so. Reduce the intensity and give them a chance to recover. Repeatedly keeping them in an overwhelming situation is not a useful way to teach calm behaviour.

Offer a comfortable resting area, suitable activities and predictable opportunities for meals and toilet breaks. Adapt exercise to the dog's age, health and response. More activity is not automatically better, and a sniffing walk should not be sold as a guaranteed hormone treatment.

Our [rainy-afternoon activity guide](#) includes simple ways to balance enjoyable activities with rest.

When to get help

Keep a note of what happened before the behaviour, how your dog responded and how long they took to settle. Video can be useful if you can record without putting anyone at risk. Share observations rather than trying to diagnose the hormone involved.

Contact your vet about sudden behaviour changes, increased thirst or urination, changes in appetite, unexplained hair loss or other concerns about health. Do not stop or change prescribed medication without veterinary guidance.

For help with the training and management side, [contact Jordan Dog Training](#). We can help you plan manageable practice and identify when veterinary input is needed.

Further reading

[MSD Veterinary Manual: Cushing syndrome](#). This medical resource does not mean that a stressed or excitable dog has Cushing syndrome.