

Melanie has a ten-year old terrier mix named Daschel that over the last few months has been drinking a lot of water and urinating more as a result. She has also noticed his appetite has become ravenous and he seems to be gaining weight. He also has bad breath. She also mentioned that he seems to be slowing down a bit, as his walks have become shorter and shorter.

This presentation from Melanie is a good one in that it provides a good amount of information about what's happening with Daschel. It is really important when discussing your companion and their problems with your veterinarian, that you share as much information as possible. Correspondingly, it is very important that we as veterinarians listen carefully to what caretakers have to say. Our patients do not talk to us in conventional language: therefore, we must rely on their humans to communicate for them. Of course there are other quite effective methods of communication used by our companions, but these are usually understood best by you as their caretaker, again making your observations very important in the diagnostic process.

In considering Daschel's described symptoms, several possibilities spring to mind. As we've discussed here in the past, increased thirst and urination can indicate problems with the kidneys and in Daschel's case, his recent decrease in activity and even his breath might fit that process as well. Having said this however, his increased appetite is not a usual symptom of kidney disease.

Another disease process that might cause these symptoms, or at least some of them, is diabetes mellitus. This process has also been discussed in previous articles, but to summarize here, diabetes mellitus is a disease involving lack of insulin production from the pancreas. Insulin is necessary to take the sugar from the blood stream and deliver it to the cells of the body to use as their energy source. Without adequate insulin, the sugar accumulates in the blood stream while the cells are starving for fuel. These patients are ravenous because their bodies have no sugar in the cells and eventually, this process leads to death. These patients also drink lots of water resulting in lots of urine production because of the extra sugar in the blood stream. The body tries to decrease the relative amount of sugar in the blood by increasing the fluid within the blood. In Daschel's case, his ravenous appetite, increased thirst and urination, and decreased activity could all fit with a diagnosis of diabetes mellitus. What doesn't fit is the perceived weight gain. Diabetic companions, when left untreated, lose weight.

A third possibility in this case might be Cushings disease or hyperadrenocorticism. This disease comes in two forms but the results are generally the same. Dogs with Cushings disease, will very commonly drink and urinate excessively, eat ravenously, and can become weak over time. Even the bad breath can fit, as these dogs will commonly have dental disease and other infectious processes due to the depressing of the immune system from the Cushings disease. These dogs often appear to gain weight because fat from throughout their bodies is redistributed into their abdomens causing them to look heavier. Other signs commonly noted with this disease include hair loss evenly on both sides of the body, excessive panting while breathing, and thinning of the skin.

Cushings disease involves the production of cortisol in excessive amounts from the adrenal glands. Perhaps you've heard of cortisone, a medication used widely in both human medicine and veterinary medicine. It is a derivative of cortisol. This cortisol is an extremely important product of the adrenal glands; in fact, so much so that without it you would die. But, in excessive amounts it becomes very deleterious, eventually breaking the body down to a point of no return.

As mentioned earlier, there are two forms of Cushings disease. One results from a tumor in one or both of the adrenal glands that decides to make too much cortisol. This tumor does not respond to the body's normal control feedback mechanisms and continues to make excess cortisol. The other form of this disease involves over stimulation of the adrenal glands from a tumor in the pituitary gland, leading to overproduction of cortisol. I do not want to make this discussion too technical (translate: boring) but I do feel it's important to understand this process.

The key question remains: what is wrong with Daschel? The answer will be found with a visit to his veterinarian. We have excellent diagnostic tests that can rule in or out the processes we have discussed here, as well as other possible causes of Daschel's symptoms. Hopefully, with a proper diagnosis treatment can be initiated, and Daschel can return to normal. Both diabetes and Cushings disease can be managed with proper medical therapy.