

WHAT IS IMMUNE-MEDIATED HEMOLYTIC ANEMIA?

Immune-Mediated Hemolytic Anemia (IMHA) is a serious and often life-threatening disorder in dogs and cats. IMHA results in the destruction of red blood cells which can occur within the blood vessels (intravascular hemolysis) or in other parts of the body, primarily the spleen, liver and bone marrow (extravascular hemolysis). Intravascular hemolysis tends to be more severe and carries a worse prognosis than extravascular hemolysis. This process results in severe anemia.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS WITH IMHA?

Both dogs and cats can develop IMHA, but its occurrence in cats is less common. Middle aged, female dogs are at highest risk and certain breeds seem to be over-represented. Cocker spaniels, English springer spaniels, collies, poodles, old English sheepdogs, Irish setters and dachshunds appear to be at higher risk than other breeds. More cases of IMHA are reported to occur in the spring and summer (most notably May and June) than at other times of the year.

WHAT ARE THE CLINICAL SIGNS OF IMHA?

The clinical signs of IMHA vary depending on the severity and type of hemolysis involved. The most common signs include decreased appetite, lethargy, pale gums and tongue, panting, exercise intolerance and weakness. Vomiting and diarrhea might also occur but are less common. Your pet may also appear jaundiced and have dark yellow or red urine.

HOW IS IMHA TREATED?

Treatment of IMHA includes supportive therapy to address the anemia, dehydration and secondary complications as well as therapy aimed specifically at the disease. The patient may require one or more blood transfusions to increase the ability to deliver oxygen to the tissues of the body. Specific drug therapy is aimed at suppressing the immune system in an effort to spare the existing red blood cells and give the bone marrow a chance to produce new red blood cells. Patients may need to be on medications for an extended period, up to the rest of their life. It can be a very difficult disease to treat.