

Immune-mediated Haemolytic Anaemia (Imha)

courtesy of Animal Info Publications

Author: Cathy Lambert

What is IMHA?

Also known as Autoimmune Haemolytic Anaemia (AIHA), this disease causes the body's immune system to produce antibodies to destroy its own red blood cells. Although this disease can affect any dog, some breeds are more susceptible than others.



What are the Signs or Symptoms?

The onset of this disease is variable in both the age of the dog and its severity. Dogs have been diagnosed from as young as a year old right through to 13 years, although most cases are reported from dogs in middle age (about 6). It is also more common in females than in males.

The onset may be gradual, or sudden and severe. Symptoms may include weakness, lethargy, an intolerance to exercise, listlessness, a poor appetite, laboured breathing, vomiting and diarrhoea. An affected dog may also have a rapid heart beat and pale gums. The gums may even appear yellowish (jaundiced), a colour indicative of the breakdown products when red blood cells are destroyed. The antibodies responsible for red blood cell destruction may either be classified as the warm type, which are most active at normal body temperature, or the cold type, which are most active at subnormal body temperature. Cold type antibodies will be most active in the extremities of an affected dog where it is cooler, and may cause skin lesions on the ears, tip of the tail or feet.

Red blood cells are the transport mechanism for carrying oxygen around the body, so when this disease destroys them, the body's tissues become starved of oxygen. This can be extremely serious, and in severe cases, dogs will die quite quickly from major organ failure (kidney, liver or heart).

How is it Diagnosed?

If anaemia is suspected by your vet, a blood test will help to determine what has caused it. Confirmation of IMHA can be made by the identification of antibodies that your dog's immune system has created to destroy its red blood cells.

How is it Treated?

Severely affected dogs need urgent medical attention, which unfortunately may not be enough to save their lives. Treatment revolves around reducing the rate that their red blood cells are being destroyed, and providing supportive therapy until the body has time to replace those that are lost. Hospitalisation will be necessary, along with numerous drugs and possibly blood transfusions. Less severe cases may be managed without hospitalisation.

Treatment may be required for the rest of the dog's life, and those that recover well from episodes may have relapses.

How can you Avoid Buying a Dog with IMHA?

IMHA appears to be an inherited trait, although the exact mode of transmission has not yet been identified. However, to reduce the incidence of this disease, it is recommended that affected dogs, along with their parents and siblings should not be used for breeding.