

What is IMHA?

IMHA stands for Immune Mediated Haemolytic Anaemia. It is an auto-immune condition in which the immune system attacks the patient's red blood cells and destroys them. In most patients this causes a sudden and often severe anaemia (low red blood cell count); in some it may be more gradual in onset.

As red blood cells carry the body's oxygen, animals with IMHA are often weak and lethargic due to the lower levels of oxygen in the blood. Some will have visibly pale gums and others may have a yellow tinge to the gums, the 'white of the eye' and sometimes the skin (jaundice). If untreated, IMHA is life-threatening: Many animals with IMHA are very unwell and require treatments such as blood transfusion and hospitalisation for ongoing care.

What causes IMHA?

Most cases of IMHA have no detectable underlying cause ('primary' IMHA) – it is simply due to an abnormal immune response. Some breeds may have a genetic predisposition to IMHA or other immune-mediated diseases (e.g. cocker spaniels). Some patients may have an underlying cause, so we carry out investigations to rule out potential triggers, such as infections or tumours.

How is IMHA diagnosed?

IMHA is diagnosed by blood tests, including blood cell counts and looking at a blood smear under the microscope. Other tests include a saline agglutination test or Coombs test which demonstrate the presence of antibodies against the red blood cells.

What other tests might be required?

To rule out potential triggers, other tests may include urine analysis, ultrasound scans, x-rays or a CT scan.

What complications can occur?

The two main complications of concern in IMHA are a severe anaemia, which may be life-threatening, and blood clots. IMHA predisposes animals to forming blood clots – if these clots are large and occur in organs such as the lungs, kidneys and brain they can be life threatening. Some smaller blood clots can produce milder transient signs. When appropriate we give medications to reduce the risk of blood clots.

What treatments are used?

- **Blood transfusions** – If the anaemia is a blood transfusion may be necessary to stabilise the patient
- **Immunosuppressive drugs** – As the disease is caused by dysfunction of the immune system, we prescribe immunosuppressive medications. Some patients have just one drug; others are prescribed multiple drugs. In some animals with severe IMHA we also use intravenous gamma globulin to gain more rapid control of the problem.
- **Drugs to prevent blood clots (anti-thrombotics)**

Does the medication have side effects?

Some pets will have side effects, though most of these are reversible as medication is reduced. The most common side effects of the first-line treatment (corticosteroids) are increased appetite, thirst and panting.

For how long is medication required?

All animals with IMHA will need treatment for several months. We gradually reduce (taper) doses of medications over many weeks. In most cases, we manage to stop medication altogether, though some animals may relapse and may need medication for longer or perhaps indefinitely.

What monitoring is required while on treatment?

While pets are on treatment for IMHA they need regular blood tests – usually every two to four weeks – to decide whether the medication can be reduced. These tests are sometimes done at the primary vet practice and sometimes at our hospital.