



**AUTOIMMUNE HEMOLYTIC ANEMIA  
 (AIHA)**

**What is Autoimmune Hemolytic Anemia?**

Autoimmune hemolytic anemia (AIHA) is a disease caused by the abnormal function of a pet's immune system. In the normal healthy animal, the white blood cells (WBCs) are part of the defense against infection. The WBCs continually survey the body through the bloodstream searching for foreign proteins, such as bacteria or viruses. When they find an abnormal substance they initiate a series of events which allow the body to destroy the invader and rid itself of infection.

In AIHA, the WBCs behave abnormally and attack the red blood cells (RBCs) as though they were a foreign substance. Perhaps the cell membranes on the RBCs have changed slightly or perhaps an antibody protein has attached to it, making it appear to be different to the WBCs — this is open to speculation. When the pet's own immune system attacks the red blood cells, it rapidly destroys them releasing their hemoglobin, which oddly enough, is toxic to the liver and kidneys. This stage is recognized by a yellow tinge to the skin (jaundice or icterus) and very dark or even bloody looking urine. This rapidly progresses to a severe anemia (low red blood cell count).

Often the blood platelets are attacked too. They are responsible for normal blood clotting. Without the ability to clot properly, these animals may also bleed from their nose, into their intestines, and into their urinary tract. Bruises may become apparent under the skin. The Cocker Spaniel seems especially prone to develop AIHA.

**Treatment**

The treatment for AIHA is aimed at suppressing the immune system's destruction of the red blood cells. High doses of corticosteroids (cortisones) are given in addition to intravenous fluids and hospitalization. Some pets will require a blood transfusion if the anemia becomes too severe.

Tick Fever or Ehrlichia can cause hemolytic anemia; it is treated the same with the addition of antibiotics to kill the causative organism. Response may take several days to weeks and the treatment is usually continued for several months after the initial hospitalization period.

Because of the life-threatening nature of this disease, the prognosis is always guarded. Recurrent episodes are occasionally seen.

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If you have any questions concerning autoimmune hemolytic anemia, please call us.

*Thank you for this opportunity to serve you!*

