

Kali is a two year old Maltese dog living in her house in Merced, California with Betty and Paul her caretakers. She has recently developed what Betty terms a skin condition, and as a result, Betty and Paul are concerned. On her belly, Betty has noticed some reddish purple spots. Initially there were but a few spots, but more recently there are many, and now Betty reports seeing them on other parts of Kali's body. Cali appears to be fine in all other respects other than she seems to be sleeping a bit more in the last few days.

What Betty is describing sounds to me like what we call petechia. These are just as described, small reddish to purple appearing spots on the skin that actually represent areas of bleeding under and within the skin. This is a potentially very serious indication of disease. I may be wrong in my interpretation here, and it may be that Kali simply has developed a pustular reaction in the skin, like pimples in humans, usually the result of a skin infection or some other type of skin reaction, possibly a contact allergic response. That said, owing to the very serious and potentially fatal nature of Kali's assumed condition, I am going to call it as a disease known as autoimmune hemolytic anemia, AIHA for short.

AIHA is a disease characterized by the excess destruction of red blood cells by the patient's own immune system. As I am sure you all realize, these animals do not do well without adequate numbers of red blood cells as they are the cells responsible for transporting oxygen throughout the body, and without timely and judicious therapy these patients can die. There are three sub groups of AIHA in dogs, classified based on the speed of onset of the process. There are the peracute cases which come on very quickly and unfortunately are very difficult to arrest with treatment and as a result carry a guarded to poor prognosis. The acute cases come on a bit less than quickly and more times than not, can be managed with appropriate and often times aggressive therapy. There are also cases of chronic AIHA that are less likely to be fatal but sometimes a bit more difficult to manage. Kali likely has the acute form.

Kali needs to see her veterinarian.....yesterday! Physical examination will verify the petechial hemorrhages and almost always, these patients will have jaundice as well. Jaundice is caused in these cases by the rapid destruction of red blood cells resulting in the release of excess bilirubin in the blood stream. The liver normally processes bilirubin which results from the normal death cycle of old red blood cells; however, the liver becomes overwhelmed with AIHA. This results in jaundice which appears as a yellow cast to the skin color, mucous membranes and the whites of the eyes. Kali will have jaundice. Blood testing will verify the high bilirubin levels in the blood as well as a low red blood cell count and specific testing for AIHA can also show positive results in these cases. That said, if that testing is negative, it does not mean AIHA is not present.

Treatment for AIHA involves suppressing the immune response against the red blood cells. This is accomplished with the use of specific drugs designed to target the arm of the immune system responsible for destroying these cells. Some cases can be managed with just one medication, usually cortisone, while others require combinations of multiple medications to bring about resolution of the red blood cell destruction.

What causes AIHA? It is a common question asked by clients when faced with a companion with this disease and the answer overwhelmingly is, we do not know. What we do know is that it is a very serious disorder and requires immediate attention.

In Kali's case, because it was so potentially life threatening, a successful attempt was made to contact Betty and Paul. I am happy to report that Kali, though dealing with AIHA, has responded well to initial therapy and looks as if she will recover.