

Bentley

Immune Mediated Hemolytic Anemia (IMHA)

By: Gretchen Byerts



Bentley before illness. Can I go horseback riding?

I have had dogs my whole life and had never heard of IMHA. Bentley had just turned 3 years old last June 2012 when he suddenly refused breakfast on Sunday morning. I tried to get him to eat during the day and he refused. He skipped dinner Sunday night and when he didn't eat breakfast on Monday morning I immediately took him to our veterinarian. After the exam and a blood test the vet came back in to the room with a very worried look on her face and said "Bentley has IMHA". I didn't know what that was or what to expect. Little did I know what Bentley and our family was going to go through over the next 8 months. IMHA is a condition where the patient's immune system begins attacking his own red blood cells. Bentley's red blood cell count was 28.1, or the packed cell count or HCT as it is called. A healthy dog should be in the range of 37.3 (low) to 61.7. Our story has a happy ending and I want to share it because it may save other dogs lives that are diagnosed with this terrible condition.

Our vet immediately put Ben on prednisone and sent us home with some soft food to try to get him to eat. I was told to bring him back in 2 days for a follow up blood test to see if he improved. When we went back in 2 days Ben's HCT was 15.6. Our vet said Ben needed a blood transfusion immediately and critical care.

We were at Gulf Coast Veterinary Specialists within the hour, Ben was admitted and his treatment began. A blood transfusion was administered along with immune suppressive drugs and by the next morning his HCT was at 25%. Bentley stayed in the hospital for two more days and when he was discharged his HCT was in a safe level for us to bring him home and care for him with the immunosuppressive medications.

I cannot possibly write all the details of his treatment but will attempt to give a timeline on what occurred.

Drugs that were prescribed initially: Prednisone, Cyclosporine, Doxycycline, Azathioprine, Aspirin, Famotidine (Pepcid AC).

I have to mention that these drugs along with Bentley's vet bills were very costly. I am so thankful that we have a great health insurance policy on Bentley. The cost of his treatment over the last eight months has now exceeded \$14,000.00 and our insurance reimbursed us for 80% of the total amount.

July – September 2012

Bentley was seen by the vet at first twice a week for blood work and it tapered off to every two weeks by September. His HCT got up to around 40%. During this time we were able to taper off on the prednisone. This was a big help. Bentley lost most of his beautiful Beardie coat and had a bloated abdomen. In the beginning when Bentley was taking 20 mg of Prednisone twice a day it was necessary to let him out for a potty break every hour or he was letting go inside. We had to do this at night also. Not much sleep for me.

September 2012- New Problem. Bentley came in one day from the backyard with a swollen right rear foot and what looked like a blister on the bottom of his right foot. It was bleeding. It looked like he had been bitten by something. I brought him to the vet immediately and our vet also thought that maybe it was a spider bite. She gave him some antibiotics and we watched it for a few days. When it did not get better I brought him back to GCVS to the dermatology department. Bentley had developed a fungal infection in his right rear leg and we were starting to see little "nodules" popping up along the foot, the lower leg and the front of the hock and even above. The dermatologist said it was caused by his immune system being so out of whack and that the Cyclosporine was likely making it much worse. The Cyclosporine was stopped but the lesions only got worse. There was not much that could be done other than to put Bentley on a human anti-fungal medication, Sporonox. Cultures and sensitivity tests were done and while we waited on the results a generic anti-fungal medication was prescribed. When the results came back it was certain that he needed Sporonox and the dermatologist wanted to use the named brand drug which was around \$600 for less than a month supply. We searched Canadian pharmacies on line and found Sporonox and a 2 month supply of the named brand drug was priced at about \$285. It actually came from Turkey to us. The real problem was that the drug could only help some until Ben's own immune system was back on track and healing himself. That day was not coming fast enough.

Bentley's blood count improved but not enough to stop any of the other medications. We were able to reduce the prednisone little by little. Unfortunately, the wounds on his leg really looked bad. The hospital even mentioned amputation of his right leg, although they were not really to that point but thought it might save him. This was very serious.

Twice in October in our visits to our vet I really thought that Bentley would not be coming home with us. I was at the end of my rope. I was bandaging Bentley's leg every day because the fungal infection can actually be transmitted and we have a 13 year old Beardie that could possibly pick up the infection. My husband and I washed our hands constantly as we cared for Ben.

I was on the phone with my primary vet one day and we were talking about putting Ben down by the end of the week. This had gone on for some time and it was hard on Ben and me. I was very upset and I told her that I wanted to try one more option. A side note, I also have a veterinarian that treats an older horse

of mine for back pain with acupuncture and Eastern Medicine (herbs) and she has done a great job. Dr. Baley also treats our other Beardie due to him having liver cancer and surgery early last year. Kipper is 13 now and is still under her care. Kip's liver enzymes are not bad for a guy that had 2 ½ tumors removed from his liver and his spleen removed a year ago. I could have had Dr. Baley help with Bentley earlier but with all he was going through I had decided to let the hospital and our vet do what western medicine agreed was the course of treatment for IMHA. Keep in mind that we were seeing two vet offices and very often and did I mention that I also work? We also got our only daughter moved to Colorado for her freshman year in college during all of this.

Bentley saw Dr. Baley on 11-9-12 for the first time. She let me know there were no guarantees but we thought let's give it a couple of weeks and see what happens. She immediately put him on an herbal powder for his blood. She also suggested I treat his leg (which really looked bad at this point, picture below) with a Chinese powder and Manuka Honey.



This meant putting the herb and honey on his right rear leg every day and then bandages. In 5 days we had a blood test and Bentley's HCT was 44%!! His HCT has continued to rise every week until it is now 50%. The lesions on his leg improved drastically with the herbs and honey. The fact that the blood count improved so well Bentley's own immune system began to heal the wounds. I can't tell you how happy all are, especially Bentley.

Leg Healing Nicely



In the end maybe Bentley would have continued to get better without Dr. Baley's treatment but I can't say that is true. I don't think it was coincidental. Dr. Baley continues to administer acupuncture monthly and is now treating Ben's liver and organs to improve his organs after all his body has been through. A side note: Ben's insurance pays for acupuncture but not herbs. Dogs that have been diagnosed with IMHA should not be vaccinated ever again. This is a problem for the rabies vaccine which is required by law. We will face that hurdle when it is due.

Leg Completely Healed!



I am told with IMHA dogs either respond quickly or they don't make it. I wanted to tell this story so that if any of my fellow Beardie owners are faced with IMHA or any serious condition I think it would be prudent to try Eastern Medicine. I wish I had allowed Dr. Baley to work on Ben initially. I am a true believer. I also thank Dr. Christine Olson, our primary vet and Dr. Valerie Fadok at GCVS. We are so thankful that Bentley got his "bounce" back.

Bentley, May 2013.



Footnote from OHR: IMHA (also called AIHA – autoimmune hemolytic anemia) is the third most common AI disease (#=29). Average age of onset was 5.6 yr and sex ratio was more females (67%). AIHA was the cause of death in 12 dogs, all under the age of 12 yr except for one.

Footnote re rabies vaccination: **Waivers.** The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) policy of rabies vaccination (ref 4) now recognizes the need for a waiver from rabies for vaccination for some animals in whom vaccination poses an unacceptably high risk. Both the licensed veterinarian who has a client-patient relationship and the appropriate public health authorities need to concur that the waiver should be issued. The client must be informed that the waiver only serves to let the animal be licensed in compliance with animal control regulations. Thus, if the animal is involved in a potential rabies exposure event, the animal is considered unvaccinated against rabies for the purpose of public health regulation. The policy states that rabies waivers should be reconsidered yearly. Ref 4 - <http://www.avma.org/issues/policy/annual-rabies-vaccination-waiver.asp>