

PATIENT INFORMATION

Autoimmune Haemolytic Anaemia (AIHA)

What is it?

It is a rare blood condition. It happens when the body's immune system develops an antibody against its own red cells. This causes the red cells to be broken down which is known as haemolysis.

Antibodies are proteins made by the immune system; their function is to fight against infections. There are two main types, warm and cold.

Red blood cells carry oxygen and usually live for around 120 days. The body is constantly making new red cells to replace the old. In AIHA the immune system attacks the healthy red cells, causing them to be broken down more quickly than they can be replaced. This results in anaemia.

Anaemia is a condition where you have a lower level of haemoglobin (Hb) than normal. The normal range for a man is 130 -180 g/l. A woman has a normal range of 120 – 150 g/l.

What symptoms may you experience?

Tiredness or shortness of breath may be noticeable. You may be unable to perform your normal activities. Some people may be more aware of their heart beat being faster than usual. You may look paler.

When the red cells are destroyed they release their haemoglobin. This is broken down by the liver into a substance called bilirubin. High levels of bilirubin can cause jaundice, which results in a yellowish colouring of the eyes and skin. The urine may be darker as it contains haemoglobin and bilirubin.

What causes AIHA?

Sometimes a trigger is found such as a drug, an infection or an autoimmune condition such as: systemic lupus erythematosus. Occasionally a cancer such as lymphoma may be the cause. More often the cause is not known – idiopathic.

How is it treated?

If the trigger was a drug this is stopped.

Steroids are used to stop the immune system from making the antibody causing the red blood cells to be destroyed. Steroids are started at a high dose and then gradually reduced over a period of time. Long term use of steroids can cause side effects. These may include weight gain, thinning of the bones, diabetes and susceptibility to infections.

Folic acid is also given. This helps make more red cells to replace the ones that are destroyed.

In some cases the anaemia is so severe a blood transfusion may be needed. Sometimes other immune modulating drugs are used such as Rituximab. This is a monoclonal antibody and is given as an infusion. There are a number of immune modifying treatments which can also be used.

Another treatment may be surgery to remove the spleen. The spleen removes old and damaged cells from the body.

If you have any questions about the information in this leaflet, please contact:

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For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.