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THROMBOCYTOPENIA (Low Platelet Count)

WHAT ARE PLATELETS?

Platelets are an important component in blood clotting. Platelets circulate in the blood and when there is an injury, platelets stick to the edges of the wound and to each other, forming a plug. They then release chemicals that react with clotting factors, leading to the formation of a blood clot.

WHAT IS THROMBOCYTOPENIA?

Thrombocytopenia is the condition of having too few platelets. When the platelet count is low, it is harder for clotting to occur. The lower the platelet count is, the more likely your pet is to show signs. Some animals may show no warning signs at all. The thrombocytopenia may be discovered on routine bloodwork.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF THROMBOCYTOPENIA?

Signs may vary, but can include small, pinpoint hemorrhages in the skin or gums, nosebleeds, blood in the urine or feces, or bleeding into the joints or body cavities.

WHAT CAUSES THROMBOCYTOPENIA?

There are many causes of thrombocytopenia.

- The bone marrow may not be producing as many platelets as normal. This can be due to certain drug toxicities, chemotherapy, cancer, or infectious diseases.
- The body may destroy the platelets. The immune system can go awry and begin attacking the platelets. This can happen as a result of drug reactions, vaccines, cancer, infectious diseases, systemic lupus, or for unknown reasons.
- Ehrlichia is a tick borne disease that is known to cause a low platelet count.
- In severely ill patients with accompanying organ failure, platelets can be over utilized by the body in a rapid, uncontrolled manner leading to thrombocytopenia.

DIAGNOSIS

Diagnostic tests need to be performed to identify the underlying cause. Tests include blood work (complete blood count and serum chemistry), urinalysis, chest or abdominal radiographs, tests for specific infectious diseases, bone marrow aspiration, and tests for immune system function.

TREATMENT

Treatment is directed at the cause of the thrombocytopenia. A mild, self-limiting vaccine induced thrombocytopenia may need no treatment and has an excellent prognosis, while a thrombocytopenia due to cancer may be resolved as the cancer is treated. If your pet is diagnosed with immune-mediated thrombocytopenia, drugs that suppress the immune system will be initiated. Prednisone and Azathioprine are often the drugs of choice. Initially, these medications are started at high doses, then weaned down gradually depending on the response to therapy. Thrombocytopenia due to infectious diseases can be treated with appropriate antibiotics.