

Natural Dog Success Story: Support for Life

Optimal nutrition boosts Victor's failing immune system.

Denise Flaim

The dog: Victor, a 9-year-old Cocker Spaniel.

The problem: A couple years ago, Victor was diagnosed with masticatory myositis, in which the immune system attacks the jaw muscles, making it painfully hard for him to eat or pick up one of his beloved balls. And Victor's low red-cell counts suggested that he might be on his way to developing hemolytic anemia, in which the body perceives its own red blood cells as foreign and tries to eliminate them. In both cases, his immune system had gone haywire.

The conventional approach: For autoimmune problems, many veterinarians opt for steroids such as prednisone, which calms the immune system. Although this stops the attacks on the body, it also lowers its natural defenses and opens the door to infection.

While prednisone is often held up as an example of conventional medicine's tendency to suppress symptoms instead of getting at their root cause, Victor's veterinarian, Donna Krueger, DVM, of Wis., stresses that they have their place.

"For short-term use, prednisone can be a very powerful tool in getting control of something that's out of control," Krueger says. "Even in natural medicine, we don't say 'no' to steroids when we need them, but we do our very best not to use them long term."

Krueger used a short course of prednisone treatment — only about a week — and a lower dose. Victor was on a home-prepared diet, "and often in natural medicine when you have good nutrition, you don't need as high a dose," Krueger explains.

The holistic approach: As the low-dose steroid therapy gave Victor's body a much-needed break, Krueger developed a plan of nutritional support to help bolster his immune system.

Among the supplements she prescribed: Transfer Factor, a product based on colostrum, the first milk from cows that is rich in immune-boosting antibodies and enzymes, and "has been instrumental for me in cases of chronic infection," Krueger says.

Victor also received Ferrofood, a whole-food supplement source of iron, to help his body build new red blood cells, as well as Canine Hepatic Support, a combination of glandular extracts and whole-food extracts. "When an animal is going through the disease process, the liver is working very hard to clean up the body," Krueger explains, "especially if the animal is on steroids, because they affect the liver directly."

The result: Krueger says Victor showed some improvement within a week of his new dietary regimen, although over the next few months he seesawed a bit, with his jaw problems flaring up a couple times and requiring another quick round of prednisone. But a year later, "his blood results were all normal," and Krueger, feeling that the threat of hemolytic anemia had dissipated, discontinued the iron supplement and reduced the others.

Today Victor is still on Transfer Factor and Hepatic Support, his blood work is stellar, and his jaw problem and anemia are at bay. "For all intents and purposes, he's perfectly normal," says his owner, Shirley Hunsaker. "No one would ever know there had been anything wrong with him."

Krueger notes that there is no real "fix" for autoimmune disease — the closest thing to a cure is "not having clinical signs." Because dogs with a tendency toward immune weakness "can relapse years later, the approach is to give them the best immune support available," she says.

Caveats: Krueger notes that high-quality, human-grade supplements are expensive, especially in the long term. And while she lauds the benefits of a natural whole-food diet, she explains that owners must be willing to do their homework in order to make it nutritionally balanced.

Denise Flaim is a DOG FANCY contributing editor.