

Beware of Sulfa Antibiotics (Sulfonamides)

Australian Terrier Breed Column
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With the advent of Facebook and other social media outlets, dog owners are much more aware of the foods that are poisonous to dogs. We know we should not allow our dogs to have chocolate, coffee, caffeine, grapes or raisins. We know that coconut, coconut oil and a variety of nuts (almonds, pecans and walnuts) containing high amount of oils and fats can lead to pancreatitis. We also know the horrors of what a little bit of the sweetener Xylitol can cause. But how many people know that Australian Terriers have developed Immune-Mediated Thrombocytopenia (IMT) while taking sulfa antibiotics prescribed by well educated and trusted veterinarians?

Immune-mediated thrombocytopenia (IMT) is a very serious autoimmune disease through which a dog's platelets, a blood component produced in bone marrow, are attacked by its own body as though they are a pathogenic bacteria or virus. Thrombocytopenia is the technical term for low platelet count. Platelets are critical to blood clotting when an event occurs that damages a blood vessel. Severe bruising or uncontrolled bleeding can occur when the body's platelet count is depleted. Excessive bleeding and bruising can lead to anemia (a low red blood cell count), and death can result if it is left untreated.

To be fair, sulfa antibiotics were the first to be use systemically and paved the way for the antibiotic revolution. Sulfamethoxazole and Trimethoprim are both sulfa antibiotics commonly used to treat different types of bacterial infections in the body such as urinary tract and ear infection (otitis) and bronchitis. It is also the drug of choice to cure and prevent reoccurrence of coccidia. Sulfa antibiotics are sold under the names: Bactrim Rx, Tribriksen Rx, Ditrim Rx, Sulfatrim Rx, SMZ-TMP, as well as other generic names. These drugs are inexpensive, have a broad spectrum of action and are commonly used by many dog breeds as well as by humans with no serious side affects. But this is NOT the case for Australian Terriers.

The symptoms first manifested by Australian Terriers diagnosed with IMT after the administration of Sulfa Antibiotics are insidious. Many years ago, one of my Aussies, Flame, became lethargic with a decreased appetite after only 2 days while being treated with a sulfa antibiotic. Luckily I discontinued the drug right away, and while his recovery was uncertain for several weeks, he pulled out of it, and he is still going strong at 13.5 years old. Several years ago one of our breeders, Marilyn Harban, was not so lucky. She lost 3 of 7 dogs treated with the drug at the same time when a litter of puppies was treated for coccidia. One of her dogs experienced symptoms of polyarthritis during the course of treatment. The second experienced loss of appetite and the third developed a cough during the final portion of 10 days of treatment. All three shortly thereafter showed signs of excessive bleeding and were diagnosed with IMT. Marilyn wrote an excellent article for the Talkabout, the Australian Terrier Club of America's newsletter, about her experiences, and her final recommendations were "Do not use any form of Sulfa drug and do not blanket treat all dogs in your home unless they show signs of illness". I thought this advice was being heeded and passed on until I heard about a recent case of a young male Aussie having an adverse reaction while taking a sulfa antibiotic, thus this article.

Besides Sulfa antibiotics, it has also been indicated that immune-mediated diseases, including IMT, can be triggered or exacerbated by vaccines, particularly bacrtrins (vaccines against bacterial organisms, such as the leptospirosis and lyme vaccines). Therefore, extreme care should be used in the use of these vaccines as well as the use of Sulfa antibiotics on the Australian Terrier.

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