Article type: Editorial

Home Page URL: https://www.alliedacademies.org/hematology-blood-disorders/

Understanding hemolytic anemia: When red cells break too soon.

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Received: 02-Sep-2025, Manuscript No. aahbd-25-171226; **Editor assigned:** aahbd-25-171226, PreQC No. aahbd-25-171226 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 17-Sep-2025, QC No. aahbd-25-171226; **Revised**: 24-Sep-2025, Manuscript No. aahbd-25-171226 (R); **Published**: 30-Sep-2025, DOI: 10.35841/aahbd-8.3.229.

Introduction

Hemolytic anemia is a complex and potentially serious condition that arises when red blood cells (RBCs) are destroyed faster than the body can replace them. This premature breakdown—called hemolysis—disrupts the body's ability to transport oxygen efficiently, leading to fatigue, weakness, and a host of other complications. While anemia is a common term, hemolytic anemia represents a distinct subset that demands deeper understanding due to its varied causes, diagnostic challenges, and treatment options. Red blood cells typically live for about 120 days before being recycled by the spleen. In hemolytic anemia, this lifespan is drastically shortened, resulting in a shortage of RBCs and reduced oxygen delivery to tissues [1].

Caused by defects within the red blood cells themselves. Caused by external factors that damage otherwise normal red blood cells. These are usually genetic and include: RBCs become crescent-shaped and prone to rupture. Defective hemoglobin synthesis leads to fragile RBCs. A lack of the enzyme glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase makes RBCs vulnerable to oxidative stress. RBCs become sphere-shaped and are destroyed prematurely by the spleen. The immune system mistakenly attacks RBCs [2].

A special form of hemolytic anemia occurs in newborns due to Rh incompatibility between mother and fetus. Maternal antibodies attack fetal RBCs, leading to severe anemia and jaundice. Prevention through Rh immunoglobulin (Rho(D) immune globulin) has significantly reduced incidence. Hemolytic anemia affects millions worldwide, with genetic forms like sickle cell disease and thalassemia being more prevalent in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. G6PD deficiency is common in Mediterranean and Asian populations. Awareness and screening programs are essential in high-risk regions. Malaria and Mycoplasma pneumoniae can trigger hemolysis. Certain antibiotics and anti-inflammatory drugs may induce hemolysis. Artificial heart valves or dialysis equipment can physically damage RBCs. Receiving mismatched blood can lead to alloimmune hemolysis. The symptoms of hemolytic anemia vary depending on the severity and underlying cause but commonly include: Fatigue and weakness, Pale or yellowish skin (jaundice), Shortness of breath, Dark-colored urine [3].

Diagnosing hemolytic anemia involves a combination of clinical evaluation and laboratory tests: Reveals low hemoglobin and hematocrit levels. Elevated levels indicate increased bone marrow activity to compensate for RBC loss. Shows abnormal RBC shapes (e.g., spherocytes, schistocytes). Elevated due to cell breakdown. Decreased levels suggest free hemoglobin from lysed RBCs. Detects antibodies on RBCs in autoimmune hemolysis. First-line therapy to suppress immune response [4].

Used when steroids are ineffective. Targets B-cells responsible for antibody production. Removal of the spleen may help reduce RBC destruction. Supports RBC production. Used during severe anemia episodes. Considered in severe cases like thalassemia major or sickle cell disease. Removes harmful antibodies in severe autoimmune cases. Chronic hemolytic anemia can affect quality of life. Patients may experience frequent fatigue, require regular medical monitoring, and face complications such as gallstones, iron overload, or heart problems. Psychological support and patient education are crucial for long-term management [5].

Citation: Suaan M. Understanding hemolytic anemia: When red cells break too soon. Hematol Blood Disord. 2025;8(3):229.

Conclusion

Advancements in genomics and immunotherapy are reshaping hemolytic anemia treatment: Promising results in sickle cell and thalassemia trials. Offers potential for correcting genetic mutations. Targeted therapies for autoimmune hemolysis are under development. While genetic forms cannot be prevented, acquired hemolytic anemia may be mitigated by: Avoiding known triggers (e.g., certain medications), Timely treatment of infections.

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