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1 Investigation of hypomagnesaemia prevalence and underlying aetiology in a hospitalised cohort  
2 of dogs with ionised hypocalcaemia

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28 conduct of research, reporting of the work described in the article and the named guarantor.  
29 RM contributed toward conceptualising, planning and editing of drafts. IO contributed  
30 toward statistical analysis and editing of drafts. AG, CJ and PB contributed to planning and  
31 editing of drafts. YC contributed by planning and conducting research.

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39 **Abstract**

40 **Objectives**

41 Calcium is the most abundant mineral in the body and plays a critical role in a wide range of  
42 physiological processes. Low concentrations of ionised calcium, the most metabolically  
43 available form of calcium, have been linked to an increased risk of adverse clinical outcomes  
44 in dogs. Magnesium plays an important role in parathyroid hormone function. The objective  
45 of this study was to define the prevalence and aetiology of hypomagnesaemia in a  
46 hospitalised cohort of dogs with ionised hypocalcaemia.

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48 **Methods**

49 A total magnesium reference interval was established using serum biochemistry results from  
50 346 clinically healthy dogs. The clinical records of dogs with ionised hypocalcaemia were  
51 reviewed and concurrent serum magnesium concentrations were recorded alongside clinical  
52 signs and underlying aetiology. The prevalence, clinical presentation and aetiology of  
53 hypomagnesaemia were examined in the ionised hypocalcaemic population.

54

55 **Results**

56 295 ionised hypocalcaemia dogs were identified. Hypomagnesaemia was identified in 22%.  
57 Total magnesium concentration was significantly higher in dogs with renal disease. The most  
58 common cause of concurrent hypomagnesaemia and ionised hypocalcaemia was  
59 gastrointestinal diseases.

60

61 **Conclusion**

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63 Low concentrations of serum magnesium occur in approximately one fifth of all dogs with  
64 ionised hypocalcaemia. Further work is required to clarify the link between magnesium  
65 status, ionised hypocalcaemia and clinical outcome.

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109 **Introduction**

110 Calcium is an important mineral, required for cellular functions such as enzyme activity,  
111 membrane stability and transport, as well as playing a critical role in skeletal development  
112 and health (1). Calcium circulates in three forms; ionised calcium (iCa), protein bound and  
113 bound to non-protein anions (e.g. citrates, phosphates, lactate, and other small, diffusible  
114 anions). Ionised calcium is the most metabolically active component (1). Under normal  
115 physiological conditions there are three main hormones that control calcium homeostasis;  
116 parathyroid hormone (PTH), calcitonin and 1,25 dihydroxycholecalciferol. Parathyroid  
117 hormone is released in response to decreased ionised calcium and has a wide range of  
118 physiological effects on several different organs, with the overall impact of increasing serum  
119 ionised calcium. Parathyroid hormone also acts to upregulate 1-alpha-hydroxylase in renal  
120 peritubular cells, which converts 25-hydroxycholecalciferol (25(OH)D) to 1,25  
121 dihydroxycholecalciferol, leading to increased intestinal absorption of calcium (1,2).

122

123 Hypocalcaemic disorders are clinically important in veterinary patients. Ionised  
124 hypocalcaemia (IHC) decreases the threshold potential of neuronal, cardiac and muscle cells  
125 and as a result, the majority of clinical signs associated with hypocalcaemia are a result of  
126 increased cell excitability (3). Dogs with IHC can present with a variety of signs including  
127 weakness, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, arrhythmias and a spectrum of neurological  
128 signs including seizure activity (4–7). Importantly, the severity of IHC has been associated  
129 with all cause morbidity and mortality in dogs and associated with poor outcomes in canine  
130 critical illness (8,9).

131

132 Similar to calcium, magnesium is present in the serum in ionised, protein bound and  
133 complexed forms. Magnesium is an essential element, acting as a cofactor in a large number

134 of vital intracellular physiological reactions(10). Total serum magnesium remains the most  
135 commonly measured form of magnesium as free magnesium requires the use of specialised  
136 ion selective electrode techniques.

137

138 Disturbances in magnesium homeostasis are increasingly recognised in veterinary patients,  
139 especially in critically ill animals (11). Magnesium is required for the function of the sodium  
140 potassium ATPase pump and is therefore vital for control of electrolyte gradients across cell  
141 membranes (12). Similar to IHC, hypomagnesaemia has been linked to exacerbating  
142 morbidity in both human and veterinary patients (13–17). For example in human patients,  
143 hypomagnesaemia has been linked to morbidity in patients with diabetic ketoacidosis and  
144 hypoparathyroidism (18,19). However, few studies have examined the relationship between  
145 magnesium and calcium in veterinary patients.

146

147 Both hypomagnesaemia and hypocalcaemia can share a similar pathogenesis in veterinary  
148 patients involving intestinal loss, malabsorption, altered distribution and abnormalities of  
149 vitamin D metabolism (20,21). Magnesium also plays a key role in regulating calcium  
150 homeostasis by modulating the production and release of PTH (22). Severely decreased  
151 magnesium concentration results in an inhibition of PTH release (23–25) by inhibiting  
152 magnesium-dependent enzymes required for PTH exocytosis (24). This functional  
153 hypoparathyroidism decreases calcium and magnesium absorption in the distal convoluted  
154 tubule of kidney. Consequently, severe hypomagnesaemia can lead to clinically relevant  
155 hypocalcaemia in people (26). In human medicine, evaluation of magnesium in patients with  
156 IHC is considered standard clinical practice (23) since resolution of hypocalcaemia can be  
157 challenging without magnesium repletion (23). Despite the improved understanding of the  
158 importance of magnesium in regulating plasma concentrations of ionised calcium in humans,

159 the role magnesium plays in regulating canine calcium homeostasis and the prevalence of  
160 hypomagnesaemia in dogs with IHC is poorly understood. A better understanding of the  
161 relationship of magnesium status in dogs with IHC may help guide diagnostic and monitoring  
162 strategies. Consequently, the aim of this study was to define prevalence of total serum  
163 hypomagnesaemia in a population of hospitalised dogs with IHC and to establish which  
164 diseases have the highest prevalence of concurrent hypomagnesaemia and IHC.

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184 **2. Method**

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186 **2.1 Design and setting**

187 The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies clinical database was searched for dogs with  
188 IHC at admission from January 2012 and November 2018. IHC was defined as  $iCa \leq 1.18$   
189 mmol/L (reference interval [RI] 1.18-1.53mmol/L) (27). Dogs younger than 12 months of age  
190 were excluded. The medical records of dogs with IHC were reviewed and the following  
191 variables were recorded: age, breed, sex, glucocorticoid administration, diuretic therapy, final  
192 clinical diagnosis and serum iCa, total calcium (tCa), albumin and magnesium  
193 concentrations. Analytes of each dog were measured at the same time point and as part of  
194 routine biochemical analysis. If dogs presented with IHC more than once, the first instance of  
195 IHC was recorded. Dogs treated with glucocorticoids or diuretics 48 hours prior to referral  
196 were excluded. Only dogs with IHC and available magnesium values were included in the  
197 study. The study was approved by R(D)SVS VERC.

198 Ionised calcium was measured within one hour of sample collection and the analysis of the  
199 remaining biochemistry was performed within three hours of collection. Measurement of  
200 biochemical analytes was performed on serum and measurement of iCa on lithium heparin  
201 whole blood. The iCa sample was drawn into a syringe after sampling and the syringe capped  
202 by adding a stopper in order to facilitate anaerobic storage prior to analysis. The AU480  
203 biochemistry analyser was used for all biochemical analyses other than for iCa (Beckman  
204 Coulter, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, UK). The Gem 3500 analyser (Instrumentation  
205 Laboratory, Warrington, Cheshire, UK), which employs an ion-selective electrode assay, was  
206 used for measurement of the iCa.

207 **2.2 Establishing total magnesium reference interval**



208 Total serum magnesium (tMg) concentrations were obtained using the same healthy cohort as  
209 previously reported (27). Dogs were included if no clinical signs or significant history were  
210 reported by the owner and no abnormalities were detected by an attending veterinary  
211 surgeon. All dogs were fed commercially available diets and no dog was receiving  
212 supplementation or medication. Total serum magnesium was measured on the AU480  
213 biochemistry analyser (Beckman Coulter, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, UK).

214 Reference intervals for tMg were established using a previously described Reference Value  
215 Advisor, a non-parametric Excel software tool (28). In short, the 95% coverage reference  
216 interval was defined by the 2.5 and 97.5 percentiles from the observed data with percentiles  
217 then obtained by linear interpolation when the data did not fall within exact percentiles.

### 218 **2.3 Ionised hypocalcaemia diagnostic groups**

219 The cases were grouped, according to a previously published article on IHC (29), into the  
220 following aetiologies (1,30);gastrointestinal disease (GI), renal disease (REN), pancreatitis  
221 (PAN), immune mediated disease (IMM), endocrine disease (END), neoplasia (NEO),  
222 hepatic disease (HEP) and miscellaneous conditions (MIS).

223 In dogs with comorbidities, the diagnosis leading to the most significant clinical signs and  
224 which would most likely account for the IHC was selected as the categorising diagnosis.

225 Cases in which the final diagnosis was not covered in the seven major groupings were  
226 classified as miscellaneous.

### 227 **2.4 Stratification of IHC severity**

228 Dogs were grouped in three categories according to the iCa concentration and stratified, as  
229 mild (1.00 – 1.17 mmol/L), moderate (0.8 – 0.99 mmol/L) and severe (< 0.8 mmol/L) (31).

## 230 2.5 Statistical analysis

231 The data distribution was evaluated using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The chi-square test was used  
232 to examine the association between the levels of two categorical variables. The Wilcoxon  
233 rank sum test with continuity correction was used to compare continuous data. The Kruskal-  
234 Wallis test was used to compare three or more independent groups. When statistically  
235 significant differences were observed using the Kruskal-Wallis test, post-hoc tests were  
236 conducted employing Dunn's test in order to control the family-wise error rate and define  
237 which groups presented statistically significant differences. The correlation between two  
238 variables was examined with Spearman's correlation coefficient. All the statistical analyses  
239 were performed using the statistical language R (R Foundation for Statistical Computing,  
240 Vienna, Austria). For all tests applied, a P value  $<0.05$  was considered significant.

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266 **Results**

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269 **Ionised calcium and total calcium**

270 The distribution of all variables was non-Gaussian. A total of 295 dogs met the inclusion  
271 criteria. The median iCa concentration was 1.13 mmol/L (range: 0.71 - 1.17 mmol/L). There  
272 was nineteen entire male dogs (6%), one hundred and fifty neutered males (51%), six entire  
273 females (2%) and one hundred and twenty (41%) females were neutered. The median age in  
274 the IHC cohort was 7 years (range: 1 to 14 years). The most common breeds with IHC were  
275 Labradors (n=29, 10%), cocker spaniels (n=20, 7%) and cross breeds (n=14, 5%).

276 Two-hundred and sixty five (90%) dogs had mild IHC (1.00 - 1.17 mmol/L), twenty-five  
277 (8%) dogs had moderate IHC (0.8 – 0.99 mmol/L) and five (2%) with severe IHC (< 0.8  
278 mmol/L). No statistically significant difference (P = 0.596) in the distribution of sex was  
279 noted between the dogs with mild IHC (149 males and 116 females) and dogs with moderate  
280 and severe IHC (20 males, 5 females). Dogs with severe IHC were combined with moderate  
281 IHC to facilitate statistical analysis. There was no statistical difference in breed (P = 0.466),  
282 sex (P = 0.598) or age (P = 0.141) between all groups either when compared individually or  
283 when the mild IHC group was compared with the moderate and severe IHC group combined.

284 All 295 IHC dogs had a serum tCa concentration recorded. Two hundred (68%) dogs had a  
285 decreased tCa (RI: 2.24 – 2.85 mmol/l). The median tCa was 2.12 mmol/L (0.81-2.80  
286 mmol/L). One hundred and seven (36%) of dogs with IHC had a tCa within the RI. There  
287 was a statistically significant, weak positive correlation ( $\rho = 0.287$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) between tCa  
288 and iCa.

289 **Total serum magnesium reference interval**

290

291 Three hundred and forty-six clinically healthy adult dogs were used to establish the total tMg  
292 RI. The median age of these dogs was 5.9 years (range: 1 to 14 years). There were 161  
293 spayed females (47%), 24 entire females (7%), 113 neutered males (33%) and 48 entire  
294 males (14%). Dogs in the healthy cohort were younger ( $P = 0.018$ ) and more likely to be  
295 entire ( $P = 0.008$ ) than the IHC dogs. The most common breeds were cross breed dogs  
296 ( $n = 91$ , 26%), Labrador retrievers ( $n = 49$ , 14%), cocker spaniels ( $n = 29$ , 8%), springer  
297 spaniels ( $n = 15$ , 4%) and golden retrievers ( $n = 14$ , 4%). There was significant correlation  
298 between tMg and tCa ( $\rho=0.275$ ,  $P <0.001$ ) and between tMg and serum albumin  
299 ( $\rho=0.339$ ,  $P <0.001$ ) in the healthy dog. There was no correlation between tMg and iCa ( $\rho$   
300  $= -0.094$ ,  $P = 0.105$ ).

### 301 **tMg, IHC, tCa and albumin**

302 Of the 295 dogs with IHC, sixty-four (22%) ionised hypocalcaemic dogs had a tMg  
303 concentration below the reference interval, 221 (75%) had a tMg concentration within the  
304 reference range and ten dogs (3%) had IHC and hypermagnesaemia. The median age of dogs  
305 with IHC and hypomagnesaemia was 7 years (range: 1 to 14 years). There were two entire  
306 females (3%), 25 neutered females (39%), 7 entire males (10%) and 30 neutered males  
307 (46%). The most common breeds with hypomagnesaemia and IHC were Labradors ( $n = 9$ ),  
308 cocker spaniel ( $n = 6$ ) and labradoodle ( $n = 4$ ).

309 Fifty-five out of 64 (86%) dogs had mild IHC, 7 (11%) dogs had moderate IHC and 2 (3%)  
310 dogs had severe IHC. No significant correlation was found between tMg concentration and  
311 iCa concentration ( $\rho = -0.094$ ,  $P = 0.105$ ). Serum tMg concentration was weakly positively  
312 correlated with tCa concentration ( $\rho = 0.275$ ,  $P <0.001$ ) and with serum albumin  
313 concentration ( $\rho = 0.339$ ,  $P = <0.001$ ). There were no statistical differences in serum



Hypomagnesaemia	64	6	5	24	6	11	2	6	4
Normomagnesaemia	218	26	14	56	14	40	7	25	36
Hypermagnesaemia	13	1	0	2	0	2	2	4	2

336

337 **Table 1:** Number of IHC dogs with hypo-, normo- and hypermagnesaemia within each IHC

338 diagnostic category. IMM, immune mediated, END, endocrine disease; GI,

339 gastrointestinal/dietary disease; HEP, hepatic disease; PAN, pancreatitis; PHP, primary

340 hypoparathyroidism; REN, renal disease; MIS, miscellaneous causes.

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358 **Discussion**

359 This study reports the prevalence of tMg abnormalities in a large population of dogs with  
360 IHC. We found that 22 % of dogs with IHC were hypomagnesaemic. This study documented  
361 that there was a significant difference in serum tMg concentration between IHC disease  
362 categories. Results of this study found no significant difference between the prevalence of  
363 hypo-, normo- and hypermagnesemia between different IHC disease categories. Furthermore,  
364 tMg concentrations did not differ significantly between IHC severity groups.

365

366 Although tMg's role in contributing to IHC has been postulated in veterinary patients, this is  
367 the first study to assess the relationship between tMg and iCa in a large number of IHC dogs.  
368 Our study did not find a relationship between tMg and severity of IHC despite both moderate  
369 and severe IHC being combined for statistical appraisal.

370

371 Results of our study agree with a previous canine experimental study (32), providing  
372 corroborating clinical evidence that roughly one fifth of IHC dogs are hypomagnesaemic.  
373 The results are consistent with findings in humans with IHC where 2 - 65 % of patients are  
374 likely to be hypomagnesaemic (33).

375

376 In our study, the most common disease grouping of dogs with hypomagnesaemic and IHC  
377 was gastrointestinal diseases. Ionised hypocalcaemia is a well-recognised complication of  
378 gastrointestinal disease, particularly in dogs with a protein losing enteropathies (PLE)(34–  
379 37). Hypomagnesaemia has also been documented in conjunction with IHC in canine PLE.  
380 Future studies investigating the relationship of calcium, albumin and magnesium in different  
381 gastrointestinal conditions are warranted.

382

383 Results showed that over a third of dogs with IHC had a total calcium within the reference  
384 interval. Discrepancies between total calcium and ionised calcium have been reported in both  
385 human and veterinary literature (27,38–40). A previous study documented that approximately  
386 one third of dogs with ionised hypercalcaemia had a total calcium within the reference  
387 interval (27). Results of this paper highlight the value of measuring both total and ionised  
388 calcium when assessing calcium homeostasis in ill dogs.

389

390 The measurement of total magnesium was a major limitation of this study. Extracellular  
391 magnesium represents only 1% of total body magnesium. Ionised magnesium represents 55 –  
392 70% of extracellular magnesium and is considered to be the most biologically active  
393 constituent (10). Measurement of total serum magnesium does not adequately correlate with  
394 whole body magnesium levels because as in human patients only 0.3% of total body  
395 magnesium is contained in serum(41). The correlation between iMg and tMg is highly  
396 variable in human studies, affected not only by the underlying disease process but also the  
397 degree of hypoalbuminaemia (42–44). Similarly this measurement does not predict the  
398 intracellular magnesium level, which is responsible for vital cellular reactions (45).

399

400 In summary, this study demonstrated that 22% of IHC dogs were hypomagnesaemic. The  
401 most common disease causing concurrent IHC and hypomagnesaemia was gastrointestinal  
402 disease. Further studies are required to explore the impact of treating hypomagnesaemia on  
403 calcium homeostasis in dogs with IHC.

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