

Heart Disease in Cats and Dogs

A brief guide on disease progression including end-of-life symptoms

Common Signs of Pain

- Panting
- Lameness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Pacing
- Abnormal posture
- Body tensing
- Poor grooming habits
- Tucked tail
- Dilated pupils
- Licking sore spot
- Muscle atrophy
- Decreased appetite
- Vocalizing/yowling
- Reclusive behavior
- Aggressive behavior
- Avoiding stairs/jumping
- Depressed
- Unable to stand

Before your pet's condition becomes unmanageable or they are losing quality of life, it is important to begin end-of-life care discussions. Learn about [pet hospice care](#) and/or [euthanasia services](#) in your area so you are prepared for what lies ahead.

What is it?

Heart disease in animals is either congenital (they are born with it) or acquired (develops due to an underlying cause). Congenital disease is usually seen in younger animals, affecting many smaller breeds, whereas acquired heart disease is generally seen in older dogs and cats. Small breed dogs often develop leaky heart valves due to degenerative changes. Cats and large breed dogs are more likely to develop heart muscle dysfunction. Acquired disease is caused by trauma, infection, or degeneration. Congestive heart failure is usually caused by the heart's inability to pump blood forward in a normal manner. Stress is placed on the heart muscle and valves and a back-up of blood may occur in the lungs and liver. Heart disease is often diagnosed with radiographs (x-rays), ECG, and an echocardiogram (ultrasound of the heart).

How is it treated?

There are many treatments available for congestive heart failure, each one focusing on the underlying cause of the disease. Drug therapies may be directed at correcting an irregular heartbeat, increasing the amount of blood pumped by the heart with each beat, or decreasing the amount of fluid retained in the lungs and abdomen. A diet low in salt is also an important component of therapy, as it helps minimize fluid retention in the body.

What is the prognosis for congestive heart failure?

If caught early enough, pets with heart failure can be treated and live many more excellent years. There are times, however, that the disease is so severe and function is so compromised that quality of life is no longer present. A personalized treatment plan is important to slow the progression of congestive heart failure or any heart disease. Talk to your veterinarian regarding the best treatment protocol for your pet.

What symptoms can present as the disease progresses?

EARLY STAGES:

- Reduced activity/lethargy
- Increased sleeping
- Exercise intolerance
- Coughing – especially at night or early morning
- Weight loss
- Diarrhea
- Possible fainting spells

LATE STAGES:

- Severe weight loss
- Distended abdomen
- Vomiting/diarrhea
- Blue-gray colored gums
- Leg swelling
- Difficulty swallowing
- Difficulty breathing
- Fluid lung sounds
- Unable to rise

CRISIS:

Immediate veterinary assistance needed regardless of the disease

- Difficulty breathing
- Prolonged seizures
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Sudden collapse
- Profuse bleeding – internal or external
- Crying/whining from pain*

**If your pet vocalizes due to pain or anxiety, please consult with your tending veterinarian immediately.*