

Heart Disease in Dogs

A Brief Guide • Part of the Educational Pet Disease Series from Lap of Love

Signs & Symptoms

Initial Symptoms

- Fainting spells
- Quiet behavior
- Distended abdomen
- Swelling of the legs
- Coughing
- Increased sleeping

Intermediate Symptoms

- Exercise intolerance
- Unable to get comfortable
- Mild to severe weight loss
- Inappetence and nausea
- Vomiting and diarrhea
- Pacing

Advanced Symptoms

- Sudden collapse
- Difficulty rising
- "Wet" breath sounds
- Blue gums/tongue
- Panting
- Trouble breathing

Crisis Situations Requiring Immediate Medical Intervention

- Difficulty breathing
- Wet lung sounds
- Blue gums and/or tongue
- Sudden collapse
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Crying and whining in pain

What Is It?

Canine heart disease is broadly categorized as either congenital (present at birth) or acquired (develops over time), both of which can have a genetic component. Congenital disease is usually detected in younger animals, especially small breeds or high-risk breeds (Cavalier Spaniels, Toy Poodles). Acquired heart disease is generally seen in middle-aged to older dogs. The most common type of heart disease in dogs, especially small and toy breeds, develops from leaky heart valves; leaking develops because of degenerative changes over time. Other causes, more common in larger breeds, develop from malfunctioning of the heart muscles leading to chronic changes such as heart chamber enlargement. Other causes of acquired disease can include trauma, bacterial and/or viral infection, and parasites (heartworm disease). Heart disease is classified, regardless of the cause, into stages based on a number of criteria. As heart disease progresses, the risk of congestive heart failure (CHF) increases. CHF results from the heart's inability to pump blood normally any longer. As the "pump" mechanism of the heart muscle fails, fluid backs up into inappropriate areas of the dog's body such as the abdomen and lungs. Due to the complicated nature of diagnosing, treating, and managing cardiac disease, consultation with a board certified veterinary cardiologist is recommended to provide the best standard of care.

Diagnosis

Heart disease is commonly initially diagnosed during a routine physical exam based on the detection of a heart murmur and/or arrhythmia (abnormal rhythm of the heart beat). Further investigation can include a variety of diagnostics such as x-rays of the chest, echocardiograms (ultrasound of the heart), ECG, blood work, and Holter heart monitors. High-risk breeds may undergo screening from a young age. In more advanced or undetected cases, diagnosis may occur at the time of a traumatic event such as collapse or fluid buildup in the lungs leading to respiratory distress.

Treatment and Management

There are many treatment and management options available for heart disease and CHF. Determination of the type of heart disease present is most helpful to direct a successful plan. A typical medical management plan may include one or more diuretics (to rid the body of excess fluid), medications to strengthen heart muscles contraction, anti-arrhythmia medications, and vasodilators. Drug therapies may also be directed toward managing concurrent diseases (such as kidney disease, liver disease, or osteoarthritis), and managing secondary changes to the lungs. A diet low in salt or a prescription cardiac diet can help minimize fluid retention. Medications to encourage eating such as anti-nausea medications and appetite stimulants can help. Regular dental care can decrease risk of development or progression of cardiac problems. Annual dentals may be vital in pets with heart issues to decrease risk of progression to CHF.

Prognosis

Depending on the type and severity of heart disease, dogs with this condition can live many years, undergo anesthesia if needed, and avoid CHF with

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proper medical management. A personalized, multi-modal treatment plan can slow the progression of heart disease and CHF. There are times, however, that the disease is so severe and function is so compromised that quality of life is no longer present. Talk to your veterinarian and veterinary cardiologist regarding the best treatment protocol for your pet.

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Management Tips

Consider providing:

- A prescription cardiac diet
- Easily accessible food and water dishes
- Ramps/stairs to common areas and sleeping areas to discourage jumping
- Access to "safe" quiet areas
- Gentle massage of limbs retaining fluid
- Modifying surfaces to increase traction
- Provide nightlights
- Low energy creative stimulation
- In-home oxygen therapy
- Palliative removal of fluid from the chest/abdomen by your veterinarian

Try to:

- Restrict salt in any treats and/or homemade diets
- Keep a stable level of temperature and humidity such as air conditioning in hot weather
- Limit stress and excitement (kids, people, noise)
- Manage weight with diets etc.
- Continue to provide preventative care such as heartworm prevention to protect your pet from other illnesses

Before your dog's condition becomes unmanageable it is important to begin palliative care discussions.