

# Heart Disease in Cats

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

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

### Advanced Symptoms

- Exercise intolerance
- Unable to get comfortable
- Mild to severe weight loss
- Inappetence and nausea
- Vomiting and diarrhea
- Clingy or distant behavior

### Crisis Situations Requiring Immediate Medical Intervention

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

## What Is It?

Feline 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 heart disease is usually detected in younger animals, or high-risk breeds (Maine Coon), and is responsible for 2% of all feline heart disease. Acquired heart disease is generally seen in middle-aged to older cats. The most common type of heart disease accounting for approximately 66% of all feline heart disease, is hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM). HCM leads to chronic changes over time resulting in irreversible thickening of the heart muscle walls. Other causes of acquired heart disease can include trauma, bacterial and/or viral infection, parasites (heartworm disease), and other primary types of heart disease. Heart disease is classified, regardless of the cause, into stages based on several 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 cat's body such as the abdomen and lungs. Due to the complicated nature of diagnosing, treating, and managing feline 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, blood pressure, and measurement of cardiac specific proteins. High-risk breeds, such as Maine Coon cats, 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 in designing a successful plan. Surgical implantation of cardiac devices, such as a pacemaker, is available if the type of feline cardiac disease would benefit. A typical medical management plan may include: one or more diuretics (to rid the body of excess fluid), blood thinners, anti-arrhythmia medications, and blood pressure medications. Drug therapies may also be directed toward managing concurrent diseases (such as kidney disease, liver disease, and thyroid disease), and managing secondary changes to the lungs. A low salt or prescription cardiac diet can help minimize fluid retention. Medications to encourage eating, such as anti-nausea medications and appetite stimulants may also help.

## Prognosis

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

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*continued from page 1*

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
- Lower 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 and/or 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 (kids, people, noise)
- Manage weight with diets etc.
- Continue to provide preventative care such as heartworm prevention to protect your pet from other illnesses
- Schedule regular dental cleanings

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