

Dogs at risk of congestive heart failure

Your dog may be identified as being at risk of congestive heart failure if he has a heart murmur or is a breed that is commonly affected.

Your vet may hear a heart murmur in the early stages of **degenerative valve disease** but your dog may appear normal. Dogs in the early stages of **dilated cardiomyopathy** (e.g. Dobermanns) also appear outwardly normal. However, if enlargement of the heart is present, medication at this stage can prolong your dog's quality of life.

For any "at risk" dog there are steps that you can take to make sure that he stays as healthy as possible for as long as possible:

- Talk to your vet about screening tests for heart enlargement to find out if your dog should receive early treatment (for example blood tests, x-rays, ultrasound or 24-hour ECG).
- Feed your dog a well-balanced diet and make sure that his weight is ideal – neither too heavy nor too thin. The practice nurses can weigh your dog and advise on feeding at no charge. Make sure that your dog's salt intake is not excessive – don't give salty treats. A standard adult or senior dog food can be used, or special prescription dog foods are available. Try to keep to the same food every day. Fish oil supplements containing omega-3 fatty acids have been proven to help cardiovascular health.
- Keep exercising your dog as normal (unless he starts to show signs of slowing down or becoming breathless). This will help keep him fit and prevent weight gain.
- Check your dog's heart rate and breathing rate regularly. One of the first signs of heart failure is an increase in heart rate, so it is good to know what is normal for your own pet. You can do this by feeling your dog's heart beat on his chest wall just behind his left elbow. Choose a time when he has been resting for at least five minutes. Count the heart beats over 20 seconds and then multiply by three to get the heart rate per minute. Become familiar with your dog's normal breathing rate and pattern while resting, as breathing rate and effort may also start to increase if congestion develops. A useful app is available which you can use to count breathing rate or heart rate (Cardalis respiratory rate counter).
- Look out for clinical signs (symptoms) of heart failure. These are described overleaf. If you are worried that your dog is showing any of these signs make an appointment with your vet as soon as possible. Ignoring early signs can lead to acute heart failure (severe breathing difficulty) which can be fatal.

Dogs in congestive heart failure.

Dogs that develop heart failure will show signs of slowing down at exercise, becoming breathless, coughing and will have an increased heart rate and breathing rate. They may also develop swelling in the abdomen, may faint and may start to lose weight. Medical treatments are available to control or eliminate these signs and can improve quality of life tremendously, often for many months or even years. However it is rarely possible to cure the underlying heart disease.

The signs happen because your dog's heart is less able to pump blood efficiently and the oxygen supply to his body is reduced. His body compensates for this by retaining fluid, but often this becomes excessive. Fluid can build up in the lungs and other tissues, making it harder for him to breathe. Medical treatments can control these congestive signs, returning your dog's breathing to normal and improving his ability to exercise. A combination of drugs is usually given, each with a different purpose but together giving effective control. The drugs include:

- Pimobendan ("Vetmedin", "Cardisure") – this has become the first choice medication for congestive heart failure in dogs. It improves the contraction of the heart muscle and opens up blood vessels to reduce the workload on the heart. Asymptomatic dogs with heart enlargement benefit from early treatment with this drug as it delays the onset of congestive heart failure.
- ACE inhibitors ("Fortekor", "Benazecare", "Vasotop" and others) – these drugs act on the kidneys to reduce fluid retention. They also open up the blood vessels and have beneficial effects on the tissues of the heart and blood vessels.
- Spironolactone ("Prilactone", "Cardalis") – this is a weak diuretic but its major role is to modulate the effect of heart failure on the heart muscle and blood vessels. Cardalis is a combination pill that contains spironolactone and an ACE inhibitor.
- Diuretics (frusemide, "Moduretic") – these drugs are used to eliminate excessive fluid from the body.

Usually a combination of these drugs is recommended to give the best improvement in quality of life and life expectancy. Treatment is tailored to individual patients.

Although **weight loss is desirable for overweight dogs**, some dogs in advanced stages of heart disease can show dramatic weight loss, called **cardiac cachexia**. **Fish oil (or omega 3) supplements** may reduce the severity of this. Excessive salt in the diet should be avoided. If your dog has a good appetite a balanced, low salt **prescription diet** is ideal. If his appetite is poor he may enjoy low-salt home cooked food with a high quality protein (e.g. chicken, egg or fish with vegetables and rice or potato). Dogs on diuretics may benefit from a **multivitamin supplement** as they lose more water-soluble vitamins in their urine.

Exercising your dog within his own limitations is recommended. If he gets breathless you know he is doing too much and his exercise should be restricted, but if he is coping then by all means he should carry on. Short, gentle walks and pottering in the garden ensure that his quality of life is maintained.

Regular examinations by your vet ensure that your dog's condition and treatments are carefully monitored and adjustments made as needed. It's also a good opportunity for you to ask your vet any questions you might have. Routine blood tests are recommended at intervals.