
Treatment

Treatment is aimed at improving heart function and reducing fluid build up in the lungs or body. Some dogs will maintain for years just on diuretics to move excess fluid, however, most also require drugs to increase heart contractility and decrease blood flow resistance making it easier for the heart to work.

Mitral valve heart disease is often simply a product of aging in small dogs, with many over the age of 6 years developing this problem. Properly maintained on constant medication and monitored, they often live a long and happy life.

Commonly Used Medication

DIURETICS –These move fluid accumulating in the body or lungs (pulmonary oedema). They often make the dog drink more and also urinate more.

DIGITALIS GLYCOSIDES. These slow the heart rate down and increase the contractile force of each beat, allowing more forceful and complete expulsion of blood from the ventricles and so better blood flow.

ACE INHIBITORS - This is a group of drugs which decrease the blood pressure in the blood vessels and so decrease the resistance to blood flow. This in turn makes it easier for the heart to beat.

BRONCHODILATORS - These drugs help lung tissue which is struggling to transfer oxygen to blood to operate more effectively.

Not all dogs require all drugs. Many will maintain for long periods on one or two different drug types.

points to remember

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is based on history, clinical symptoms, x-rays, blood tests, ultrasounds and ECG traces of the heart beat. The combination of these tests gives a good evaluation of each patient and allows for accurate treatment and prediction of life expectancy.

Dilated Cardiomyopathy is a life threatening condition of big breed dogs which requires immediate treatment. The survival time for dogs with this condition is usually short, even with treatment.

Mitral Valve Disease is a common disease in smaller breeds, and older dogs. It is usually gradual in onset and with proper care these dogs may continue to live happy lives

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heart disease in dogs

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dilated cardiomyopathy

The heart is made of four chambers. There are 2 atria and 2 ventricles. In addition it is divided into right and left sides. Blood flows from the body into the right atrium, from where it is pumped into the right ventricle. The right ventricle then pumps the blood into the lungs where it receives oxygen. It then returns from the lungs into the left atrium, is pumped into the left ventricle and then leaves the left ventricle to flow to the body.

Dilated cardiomyopathy is where the muscle of the heart is unable to pump blood properly and the pressure of blood within the heart causes the heart muscle to stretch. This is most obvious with the left ventricle which works the hardest. The two characteristics seen with dilated cardiomyopathy are heart muscle which is unable to function properly and enlarges heart chambers. Although not the most common heart disease of dogs in general, dilated cardiomyopathy is the most common heart disease of large breed dogs, especially Boxers, Dobermans, Great Danes and German Shepherds. There appears to be an increased incidence in Cocker Spaniels and English Spaniels as well.

Clinical Signs

Dogs with dilated cardiomyopathy usually have symptoms associated with build up of fluid in the lungs. These are coughing, gagging, breathlessness and exercise intolerance. The signs may develop very suddenly. Some dogs go into severe heart failure in a matter of hours, collapsing, drooling and gasping for breath.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is based on history, clinical symptoms, x-rays, ultrasounds and ECG traces of the heart beating. Often treatment must commence before ancillary tests such as x-rays can be performed due to the critical condition of the dog.

Treatment

Treatment is usually divided into two phases, stabilisation and maintenance. Stabilisation involves the administration of drugs aimed at correcting a life threatening situation. This involves hospitalisation for most dogs, with possible oxygen therapy whilst the medication aimed at improving the heart function and removing the fluid build up in the lungs take effect. Once stable the dogs are usually maintained on several types of medication. Diuretics cause fluid built up in the lungs to be eliminated through the kidneys. Digitalis glycosides increase the force of the heart contractions and slow the heart rate. This allows for better blood flow throughout the body. Vasodilators dilate arteries and veins in the body so the

heart has to beat less forcefully to push blood along. These are often effective in helping maintain a patient.

The long term prognosis for a dog with dilated cardiomyopathy is not good. With careful medical management some dogs may have good quality of life for a few months.

Mitral Valve Disease

The mitral valve between the atrium and the ventricle on the left side of heart. There is a great deal of pressure on the mitral valve, and it wears out in many dogs. This causes a gradually increasing backflow of blood from ventricle to atrium with a resulting decrease in blood flowing from ventricles to body and lungs. Mitral valve disease is the most common heart disease of small dogs. It is especially common in small breeds such as the Cavalier King Charles and the Chihuahua.

Clinical Signs

The earliest sign of mitral valve disease is a heart murmur. This doesn't mean heart failure is imminent as many dogs with heart murmurs remain normal for their entire lives. If the condition is progressing, the next sign is usually build up of fluid within the lungs causing coughing, breathlessness and exercise intolerance.