

Heart disease

Heart disease is increasingly common in dogs - probably because their average life expectancy is increasing due to improved veterinary care. Some heart defects, eg hole in the heart, are present from birth (congenital heart defects) but only cause signs as the dog gets older. Other diseases develop later in life as a result of the effects of ageing or damage to the heart. The most common heart diseases in the dog develop as the dog ages and its heart starts to wear out.

The Heart

The dog's heart, like that of humans, is a muscular pump with four separate chambers. The right side of the heart sends blood to the lungs where it picks up oxygen. The left side of the heart pumps the blood around the body. The four areas of the heart are separated by valves which ensure that blood always flows in the correct direction through the heart.

Heart disease may affect any area of the heart:

- Heart valves
- Heart muscle
- Electrical conduction
- Pericardium (a strong sac that surrounds and supports the heart)

The two most common types of heart disease in the adult dog are:

Valvular heart disease

Common in Cavalier King Charles Spaniels (CKCS) but can occur in almost any breed.

With age heart valves may become worn and degenerate and therefore get more and more leaky. Instead of closing properly each time the heart pumps, the valves flop open allowing blood to move backwards as well as forwards through the heart chambers. This results in a reduced blood supply to the body.

Dilated cardiomyopathy

Most commonly seen in large and giant breeds, particularly Dobermann pinschers, Great Danes and Irish Wolfhounds. Some spaniels are also affected and it could rarely affect dogs of any breed. The disease causes a stretching of the heart muscle walls so that the heart swells (like a balloon filled with water). The contractions of the heart muscle become very weak so blood is not pumped around the body effectively.

Signs

Many of the signs of heart disease can be confused with natural ageing changes

- Reduced energy and less desire to exercise are common
- Poor appetite and may lose weight
- Panting and coughing due to fluid build up in the lungs
- Less commonly, dogs with heart disease may faint or collapse.

Diagnosis

- When your vet examines your dog he will use a stethoscope to listen to your dog's heart. If heart disease is present, your vet may hear a change in the heart sounds. The heartbeat may be fast (or occasionally slow), irregular or there may be an unusual noise.
- X-rays may show that the heart is enlarged or an abnormal shape.
- An ultrasound can be used to see whether the heart muscle and valves are working normally.
- An electrocardiogram (ECG), records the electrical activity that causes the heart muscle to beat and can be used to see if the beat is irregular.

Treatment

Heart disease does not necessarily mean heart failure. Many dogs with heart disease have no outward signs of illness and are able to lead relatively normal lives without any medication. However, most heart diseases will get worse and once symptoms start, treatment will probably be required for the remainder of your dog's life.

- Changes to your dog's lifestyle, ie more controlled exercise.
- Drugs to improve the strength of the heart beat or change the heart rate (digoxin, pimobendan or antiarrhythmics).
- Drugs to remove excess fluid retention (ACE inhibitors and diuretics).
- Dietary changes may be recommended by your vet depending on the type of heart disease present.
- Some congenital heart defects can be corrected by surgery. If your vet recommends surgery it is well worth considering. If the problem is corrected at an early stage (before any signs develop) it may be that your dog could be cured and never require any further treatment.

Long term prognosis

Some animals with heart disease may live normal lives with no symptoms at all. Other dogs do not respond to any treatment and may die quickly. It all depends on the type and severity of the heart disease. Your vet may be able to give you an idea of the likely lifespan of your pet on an individual basis. The most important thing when managing any disease is the quality of life that your dog has. If you are concerned that your dog is feeling unwell, or consider that the treatment is not helping him, you must contact your vet for further advice.