

Congestive Heart Failure

Overview

Congestive heart failure (CHF) is caused by an abnormality in the structure or function of the heart. Because of this abnormality, the heart is unable to adequately pump blood to the rest of the body. When the problem becomes severe enough, there can be fluid accumulations in the body cavities, such as the chest or abdomen.

There are a variety of causes of congestive heart failure in the dog. In older dogs, some of the more common causes of heart failure include: degeneration of the heart valves, heart muscle disease, heartworm disease, and arrhythmias (irregular electrical rhythms). However, it is important to know that congestive heart failure can develop in dogs of any age.

Clinical Signs to Watch for

- coughing
- shortness of breath
- dyspnea (difficulty breathing)
- exercise intolerance
- fatigue

Diagnosis

Diagnosis of congestive heart failure may require several or all of the diagnostic tests listed below.

- complete physical exam
- chest x-rays
- blood pressure
- blood tests
- an electrocardiogram (ECG)
- an echocardiogram (ultrasound of the heart)
- referral to a board certified veterinary cardiologist

Treatment

Treatment of congestive heart failure will vary significantly depending on the cause of the heart failure and the severity of the disease. The goal of treatment is to improve heart function, prevent fluid retention, and slow further deterioration of the heart muscle. Rarely is there a “cure” for the heart disease. Treatment is used to help minimize the clinical signs and help slow the progression of the disease. Initial treatment may include hospitalization with oxygen and intravenous medications.

If the fluid accumulations in the body cavities are severe, it may require drainage with a needle (thoracocentesis). Diuretics (i.e. furosemide) may also be administered to help reduce the fluid retention. Often times, patients will go home on an oral diuretic to be administered at home. Many dogs with heart failure will be treated with an angiotensin converting enzyme inhibitor (ACE inhibitor).

These medications will help decrease water retention and help dilate vessels.

Another drug class used in some cases of heart failure is known as positive inotropes. These medications will improve the contractility of the heart.

Other recommendations for a dog in congestive heart failure may include a reduced sodium diet and/or dietary supplements such as taurine or L-carnitine. Treatment of congestive heart failure requires frequent monitoring of clinical signs and possible adjustments of medications to help keep your dog as comfortable as possible.

