CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE

What is it? Congestive heart failure (CHF) is a condition in which your pet’s heart doesn’t pump enough blood to meet its body’s needs. Fluid builds up in the body tissues and organs because of this. With left-sided heart failure, which is the most common, blood backs up into the lungs. The lungs then become congested with fluid and your pet will cough, pant, or have difficulty breathing. In right-sided heart failure, blood backs up to other parts of the body and you may notice swelling in your pet’s abdomen or legs. Whether heart failure is right or left sided, your pet will feel fatigue, tire easily, seem listless or lethargic, or have decreased appetite.

What animals are affected? Both dogs and cats can be affected by congestive heart failure. There are breed predilections based on the underlying heart disease that results in congestive failure – for example, Dobermans are more likely to get Dilated Cardiomyopathy, Cavalier King Charles Spaniels are more likely to have Patent Ductus Arteriosus or Myxomatous Degeneration of the Mitral Valve, and some Maine Coon cats are more predisposed to Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy.

What are the clinical signs? Animals suffering from congestive heart failure will cough or be short of breath. Difficulty breathing (dyspnea) or rapid breathing (tachypnea) may be present. Gum color may be pale to grey to blue tinged. Your pet may have a history of unexplained weight loss or may be more fatigued than usual. They may or may not have already had a diagnosed heart murmur.

How is it diagnosed? Diagnosis starts with a physical exam. The heart and lungs will be listened to carefully with a stethoscope. Chest x-rays will be taken to assess the heart and lungs as well as screen for fluid accumulation in the lungs or thorax. Other diagnostics that may be performed include blood pressure monitoring, an ECG, or ultrasound of the heart (echocardiogram).

How is it treated? Initially your pet will be stabilized with oxygen therapy and diuretics. Angiotensin converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors may be administered to block certain hormones harmful to the heart as well as prevent salt retention. Nitroglycerin may be administered to dilate the blood vessels in the heart to decrease stress on the organ and decrease pressure on the backside of the heart. If fluid in the lungs (pleural effusion) is severe enough the doctor may insert a needle into the chest cavity to drain the fluid but it is preferred to remove that fluid with diuretics and time. Other medications to actually help the heart beat better are also available for certain types of heart failure.

What is the aftercare? Administer all medications as directed by the prescribing veterinarian – do not stop them or modify doses unless directed to do so by a veterinarian. Keep track of your pet’s energy and activity levels. Watch for changes in respiratory patterns especially difficulty breathing or rapid breathing – this is the most important part of monitoring at home. Monitor for coughing and lethargy. Always have fresh water available. Avoid high stress environments, heavy activity, high heat, and humidity. Do not feed table food as your pet may be on a limited salt diet.
Unfortunately, most pets with congestive heart failure have irreversible heart disease. For these pets, life-long therapy may be indicated. Long-term follow-up includes monitoring of electrolytes, chest x-rays, and repeat echocardiogram, and resting respiratory rate.

**What is the prognosis?** Prognosis is dependent upon the underlying condition your pet has, their age and other concurrent problems, and how well they respond to medication, dietary changes, and lifestyle changes. Depending on the underlying heart condition, once a pet is diagnosed with heart failure, life expectancy can be 6-12 months or longer if they stabilize after the initial crisis. Life expectancy in cats is similar. Ultimately, pets that develop heart failure will most likely have repeat episodes of heart failure – even if everything is going well. Unfortunately, some cases of heart failure are so severe that the patient can die despite therapy.