

Heart disease in cats.

The most common heart disease seen in cats is **Cardiomyopathy**, a disease where the heart muscle becomes much thicker or stiffer than it should be. This change in heart shape or flexibility stops the heart being able to fill with blood and pump blood into the circulation as well as it should do. This ultimately leads to heart failure.

The cause is often unknown, but it can be caused by conditions such as over-active thyroid gland, high blood pressure and, rarely, by certain types of cancer or exposure to toxins.

What signs suggest my cat has heart disease?

Many cats have heart disease, but are not outwardly showing signs of illness as they are not yet in heart failure. While your cat may seem perfectly well outwardly, if the following changes are detected during a routine veterinary check-up we may recommend investigating heart disease further:

-  Hearing a heart murmur. This may be heard when listening with a stethoscope. A heart murmur tells us that blood is not flowing smoothly through your cat's heart. It does not tell us why there is a murmur though; some cats can have a heart murmur but not have any structural changes in the heart yet.
-  Hearing an abnormal heart rhythm. If there is heart disease it can affect the way the hearts normal electrical impulses are transmitted, affecting how regularly it beats.
-  Changes in heart rate. If your cat has an unusually fast (or sometimes slow) heart rate this may be due to heart disease.

Not all cats with these abnormalities have heart disease. Not all cats with heart disease will progress to showing signs of heart failure either. Usually the only way to know whether there is heart disease present or not is to perform an ultrasound exam of the heart (an Echocardiogram).

What signs suggest my cat has heart failure?

Any of the following may be seen once heart failure develops:

-  Faster breathing when resting
-  Difficulty breathing
-  Collapse or fainting (although this is uncommon)

The change in breathing is usually due to fluid building up either in the lungs or around the lungs.

Sadly sometimes the first sign a cat has heart disease is that they develop a blood clot, which can then block blood flow to certain parts of the body. This can be a particularly distressing event as it is an incredibly painful condition. It most commonly affects blood flow the back legs, causing a very sudden paralysis of the back legs and intense pain.

If your cat has any of the above signs you should contact the surgery immediately for advice.

How is heart disease diagnosed?

An ultrasound of the heart is the most useful tool for assessing the heart chambers, the thickness of the heart walls and tells us how well the heart is contracting. All of this information helps us determine whether there is heart disease present and if so, how severe the changes are and whether any treatment is needed.

We sometimes also recommend an ECG, to look at the hearts electrical activity and chest x-rays to look for changes affecting the lungs.

We may also advise a blood test and blood pressure check to look for underlying causes of heart disease.

Treatment

While we cannot usually treat the underlying cause of heart disease, there are medications that can help the heart function more effectively if needed.

If your cat has heart disease, but is not yet in heart failure, normally no treatment is recommended. We do however recommend you cat has regular veterinary check-ups to monitor for signs of deterioration.

It is also very useful to keep a record of your cats normal breathing rate at home (their "resting respiratory rate"). When your cat is relaxed, count how many breaths they take over a timed minute. Some companies have apps to help you count and record your cats respiratory rate which you may find useful e.g. Cardalis app. Normally the respiratory rate should be less than 30 breaths per minute, contact us for advice if it is higher than this or if it is increasing.

Once your cat has signs of heart disease, or we think they are at risk of developing signs of heart disease very soon, we may recommend one or all of the following medications:

-  Diuretics – Furosemide. These act to increase urine production to remove extra fluid from the body, particularly around the lungs.
-  Anti-clot medication – either Clopidogrel or Aspirin. Cats with heart disease are at an increased risk of forming blood clots, so we often recommend this medication to try to reduce the risk of a life-threatening clot forming.
-  Beta-blockers – Atenolol. These act to slow the heart rate down therefore reducing the demands placed on the heart.



What is the prognosis for my cat?

It is very difficult to predict how quickly a cat diagnosed with heart disease will progress to showing signs of heart failure. It can vary from only a few weeks to many years. However once signs of heart failure develop survival times average around 6 months, although this is an average so some cats may enjoy a good quality of life for longer, equally some cases will progress more rapidly.



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