



Dilated Cardiomyopathy

Dilated cardiomyopathy, often referred to as DCM, is a heart disease where the heart is unable to pump blood correctly. As a result, the heart enlarges as the heart muscles stretch. Due to the stretching, the heart becomes weaker and less able to pump blood.

Eventually, the heart fails and the blood starts backing up into the lungs. This causes fluid to leak out into the lungs and results in congestive heart failure. A dilated heart may also cause an irregular heart rhythm due to the stretched heart muscle.

Prevalence

DCM is a disease of adult dogs and usually seen in old age. Certain breeds are more likely to develop it such as Doberman Pinschers, Irish Wolfhounds, Great Danes, Dalmatians, and Newfoundlands. In cats, DCM is usually the result of a lack of taurine in the food. Since most cat food has the proper levels of taurine, this heart disease is not common in cats.

Signs

Signs of DCM may go undetected until heart failure occurs. With additional testing, though, we can find it on a physical exam. The most common signs of heart failure include coughing, inability to exercise normally, excessive panting, decreased activity, decreased appetite, and nasal discharge.

Other signs may include an enlarged abdomen and difficulty breathing. Dogs with irregular heartbeats may collapse or pass out suddenly. Often if they pass out, it is very sudden and brief, usually occurring during or after exercise.



Diagnosis

During a physical exam the doctor will listen to the heart and lungs for any signs of irregular heartbeat or fluid in the lungs. Chest x-rays are critical for examining the size of the heart. An electrocardiogram (ECG) looks at how the heart is beating, the electrical activity. Routine blood tests help to rule out any other health issues.



More advanced testing such as echocardiogram can be performed at a specialty hospital. This test is like an ultrasound for the heart and allows the doctor to see the heart beat and monitor the blood flow in the heart.

Treatment

Unfortunately, there is no cure for DCM. The goal of treatment is to improve the quality of life by improving the heart function. Treatment depends on the severity and stage of disease. A dog that is in early stages of dilated cardiomyopathy usually does well on heart medicines to strengthen the heart. If there is an irregular heartbeat, your pet may need additional medicine for that. There are also supplements such as fish oil, antioxidants, and coenzyme Q-10 that improve heart health.

As the disease progresses, additional medications are prescribed. One common medicine is a diuretic to remove fluid from the lungs. For severe heart failure, your pet will need hospitalization.

All dogs with heart disease should be on a low salt diet that has adequate protein levels. There are prescription diets available. Exercise should be limited and stress minimized.

Prognosis

How long a pet can live with DCM varies. Most dogs survive 3-24 months after diagnosis. Early detection with early treatment is more successful.

Prevention

We can't prevent dilated cardiomyopathy but there are many things you can do for your pet to monitor and support heart health. All dogs over 8 years old should have chest x-rays performed yearly to look for early signs of heart disease.



Early treatment will help to slow the progression of the disease. Fish oil, antioxidants, and coenzyme Q-10 are important to improve heart health. A prescription diet can be fed to dogs that are susceptible to heart disease.