



Congestive Heart Failure

What is congestive heart failure?

- Congestive heart failure (or simply heart failure) means that the heart is unable to pump enough blood to meet the body's needs for oxygen, nutrition and waste removal. Congestive heart failure causes fluid to accumulate in the lung, chest or abdomen.
- Heart failure often develops slowly, however it can develop quickly due to a sudden change in heart function.

How is heart failure diagnosed?

- There is no single test for diagnosis of heart failure. History, physical examination, heart imaging and serum biomarker tests as well as response to therapy may all play a diagnostic role.
- Common clinical signs include cough (in dogs only), shortness of breath, loss of appetite, aloof behavior and lethargy, abdominal distention, weakness, fainting and exercise intolerance.

How is heart failure treated?

- Every effort should be made to find and correct the cause of heart failure, if correction is possible.
- When correction of the cause is not feasible, medications that modify heart function are useful.
- Medications can control the symptoms of heart failure, but generally do not treat the underlying cause.
- Many dogs and cats with heart failure are treated with three medications: a diuretic (typically furosemide) in addition to pimobendan and an ACE-inhibitor. Other medications may be needed.

How is heart failure monitored?

- After an initial diagnosis of heart failure, most patients will be rechecked soon afterward to ensure that the medications and dosages are optimal.
- Physical exam, chest x-rays, ultrasound, ECG, blood pressure and/or bloodwork may be performed. Patients who respond well are often rechecked every 3-4 months (sooner if problems arise).

How can I tell how my pet is doing at home?

- The goal is for your dog to behave normally at home.
- Monitoring breathing rate when your dog is asleep will help detect the onset or recurrence of CHF.
- Normal respirations are less than 36 breaths per minute, but a 20% increase over 2 days is concerning.
- A smartphone app called Cardalis simplifies obtaining and tracking the breathing rate from a distance.
- Other signs can include decreased activity or appetite, coughing, weakness, fainting or belly distention.

Is diet important?

- It is important that your dog or cat continues to eat normally and maintain optimal body condition.
- High quality protein and modest salt restriction are generally recommended when possible.
- Avoid high salt treats and foods.

What is the prognosis with heart failure?

- Prognosis varies with the cause of heart failure – some heart failure patients with congenital heart defects that undergo interventional or surgical correction go on to live normal lives.
- For acquired diseases where complete correction is not possible, average survival time with medical therapy varies between of 6 months and 2 years.
- Close monitoring and communication with your veterinary team will provides the best chance for increasing your pet's capacity for living a full life.