

UNDER THE WEATHER

Matters of the Heart

“You mean dogs have a heart?” , was the incredulous response of this gentleman when I mentioned my thesis topic – Diagnosis of heart diseases in dogs. I immediately dismissed him as an insensitive idiot with a subnormal IQ, but the surprise was not unfamiliar. This was 24 years ago, and not many pet parents were aware that their pets could have heart problems. Fast forward to today, and I have, on any day, at least two or three parents wanting to get their pet's heart checked. This awareness has brought into focus the fact that people are more aware of preventive healthcare, both for themselves and their pets, and that pets are becoming part of the family, so annual health checks are the norm. Because of this, several diseases including degenerative diseases of the heart, kidneys, joints, which would have been previously undiagnosed, are being detected early enough for treatment to be more effective. So we as vets see more diseases because they are being diagnosed, not because they are more prevalent.

Heart diseases are one of the most common diseases in dogs. My study, 24 years ago, showed that almost 70% dogs over seven or eight years of age suffer from heart disease. This is corroborated by studies all over the world. The two most common heart diseases in dogs are dilated cardiomyopathy and valvular heart disease. In toy and small-breed dogs, chronic valvular disease with mitral regurgitation is the most common cause of congestive heart failure. In large-breed dogs, it is dilated cardiomyopathy.

Symptoms: There are a number of different symptoms, and different types of heart disease will cause separate sets of warning signs. Yet, there are certain symptoms that are common to several different forms. Often, in this condition, a lack of energy and willingness to exercise will become apparent. General fatigue and increased time spent sleeping during the day could also be signs. Increased panting and breathlessness may also occur. A dry cough is another symptom frequently exhibited, especially during the night, or first thing in the morning. Loss of appetite and weight are also common warning signs. In addition, some dogs may develop a potbellied appearance due to fluid in the abdomen and a grey or bluish tinge to their gums.

When heart disease is suspected, a basic heart work up is done, including a physical examination, X-rays and electrocardiogram (ECG). Other types of examinations that may be done include echocardiograms and doppler tests. An



**DR SANGEETA
VENGSARKAR SHAH**

ECG is able to detect irregular heartbeats, also known as arrhythmia. A doppler and echo involves the use of harmless sound waves which pass through the heart, valves and blood vessels, and can reveal a number of characteristics of the patient's heart.

Treatment: Most of the treatment options available focus upon fixing irregular heartbeats, increasing the amount of blood that is pumped with each beat, and reducing the build up of fluid in the lungs and abdomen. Traditionally, most forms of this disease have been treated with certain drugs that help to achieve the results listed above. Diet and exercise play a vital role in treating heart disease and in increasing your pet's comfort and quality of life. Exercise is beneficial, but only for dogs who are not symptomatic. If symptoms such as easy

tiring, coughing, or rapid breathing appear with exercise, do not engage the dog in activities that elicit these symptoms. Diet is also extremely important. The fluid retention typical of many forms of heart disease can exert extra pressure on the heart, therefore it's important to avoid feeding pets salty foods which will contribute to, and worsen these effects. In addition, there are several vitamins and supplements that can help fight against heart disease.

Dogs suffering from this condition may be deficient in certain vitamins, minerals or amino acids. For example, breeds like Cocker Spaniels are deficient in the uptake of amino acids called Carnitine and Taurine, and may need extra amounts of it. Furthermore, there's a wide variety of other substances that are very beneficial in cardiac problems, like CoQ 10. Various drugs are available that increase the force and contraction of the heart muscle or decrease the workload, such as digitalis glycosides, calcium channel blockers, angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors, beta blockers, and anti-arrhythmics (also used for people). ACE inhibitors such as enalapril maleate and benazepril may prolong the life of dogs with valvular heart disease and cardiomyopathy, and are commonly used in dogs with these diseases. Fluid accumulation in the lungs, and elsewhere, is managed by diuretics such as Furosemide. Dogs with congestive heart failure may benefit from vitamin-B supplements and Taurine or Carnitine.

With proper treatment, a dog with congestive heart failure can live a longer and more comfortable life. However, heart disease requires close monitoring. You will need to return to your veterinarian regularly for checkups in order to optimise the dog's life and health.

