

### **Dogs and cats get heart disease too!**

As people get older, our risk of developing a number of health conditions increases. Dogs and cats are in the same boat with conditions like heart disease, diabetes and kidney failure increasingly likely as they get older.

Heart disease is surprisingly common amongst our pets with about 1 in every 10 dogs seen by vets suffering from some form of heart disease. Heart disease means that the heart cannot pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. There may be several reasons why the heart's pumping mechanism becomes compromised – the valves aren't closing properly; the heart muscle is not contracting properly; or the heart's electrical system is misfiring.

Small breeds (especially Cavalier King Charles Spaniels) are more at risk of developing heart failure from a leaky valve (mitral valve disease), while larger breeds are more prone to failure of the heart muscle (dilated cardiomyopathy). Cats are also prone to heart muscle problems (hypertrophic cardiomyopathy).

Heart disease is a progressive illness – the body reacts to heart disease by increasing blood pressure and retaining fluid. This creates a vicious circle as the diseased heart has to work harder to cope with the increased blood pressure and excess fluid, which causes more damage. The heart becomes weaker and the body reacts again making the heart work harder again.

Diagnosis of heart disease can be as simple as listening to your pet's heart with a stethoscope, as your vet does at every visit, to see if we can detect a murmur from a leaky valve. Sometimes we may need to take X-rays to check if your pet has an enlarged heart or fluid in the lungs. More complicated heart disease may require a referral to a specialist for an ECG (to check the electrical system and rhythm) or cardiac ultrasound (to watch the heart at work).

The good news is that there are a number of treatment options for pets with heart disease. Your vet may prescribe a number of different medications which work to strengthen the heart's contractions (positive inotropes) and decrease the pressure on the heart by dilating blood vessels and reducing fluid retention (ACE inhibitors and diuretics). These medications will need to be continued for the rest of your pet's life. Other elements of the treatment plan may include weight loss, limiting exercise and reducing the amount of salt in your pet's diet.

While the treatment options for heart disease are very effective, it must be remembered that there is no cure for heart disease. With treatment, most pets enjoy a normal active life again.

Common signs of heart failure to look out for in your pets include:

- Reluctance to exercise and tiring more easily
- Coughing, especially at night
- Laboured or fast breathing (even at rest)
- Reduced appetite and weight loss
- Enlarged abdomen (pot-belly)



CARING FOR YOUR ANIMALS  
**LARGE AND SMALL**

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- Weakness

If your dog or cat is showing any of these signs, or if you'd like to get their heart checked, please contact the friendly team at Cowra Veterinary Centre.