

Mitral Valve Disease



Basics

Mitral valve disease (MVD) is the most common acquired heart disease in older, particularly small dogs. It causes a heart murmur (abnormal heart sounds) which is created by turbulent and incorrect flow of blood through the heart. This abnormal flow is caused by thickening and failure of the mitral valve which separates the top left and bottom left chambers of the heart. In time, the leaking valve causes a back-up of blood and stretching of the heart chambers and the pumping action of the heart is compromised. This change is called 'congestive heart failure' and requires lifelong therapy.

Signs and Symptoms

Usually, your veterinarian will detect your dog's heart murmur long before your dog shows any signs at home. Unfortunately, the disease is degenerative (which means it progresses and worsens with time). The average time from diagnosis of a mild heart murmur to congestive heart failure is around 4 years.

Once congestive heart failure occurs, clinical signs you might notice at home are *coughing, exercise intolerance, rapid or labored breathing, enlarged abdomen, fainting or general lethargy.*

Diagnostics

Once your veterinarian has detected a heart murmur, further tests may be suggested to assess the severity of the condition.

Specialist ultrasound (called an echocardiogram) is the gold standard of diagnosis and assessment of MVD. This is often performed in Melbourne.

Xrays are very useful to assess any changes in heart size or lung patterns.

Heart disease is common in small, old dogs but with the right management, they can have long, happy lives

Treatment

Treatment for MVD is initiated as soon as there are any clinical signs OR your vet detects any changes on your dog's xrays or ultrasound.

A new study has shown that monitoring xray changes and starting medication BEFORE clinical signs develop can extend your dog's happy life for 12 months!

For this reason, it is usually recommended that your dog have chest xrays every 6-12 months once a heart murmur has been detected.

Once treatment begins, therapy is LIFELONG and should not be stopped, even if your dog is looking bright and happy. Treatment involves the use of oral medications that are easily given at home. Your vet will recommend the best treatments for your pet but there are some general guidelines.

Pimobendan is the mainstay of therapy in MVD patients. It helps the heart work more efficiently and can significantly increase survival and quality of life.

Furosemide is another very important medication. It is a potent diuretic which acts on the kidneys to encourage removal of water from the body. This helps to remove fluid and congestion from the lungs. As your dog's condition progresses, **spironolactone** (another type of diuretic) may be given as well.

ACE inhibitors help to remove excess fluid and has other helpful effects on the body to compensate for heart failure.

As your dog's heart failure worsens, medications will be changed and doses increased.

Monitoring

Monitoring of patients with MVD is crucial to their quality of life, medication schedules and survival.

Monitoring begins even before medication is started. Xrays are recommended, usually every 6-12 months, after your pet has been diagnosed with a heart murmur.

Once your pet has started medication, monitoring becomes even more important. Regular check-ups with your veterinarian, usually every 6 months, are important to ensure changes are picked up early.

There are also simple things you can do at home which can help you and your vet make the best treatment decisions.

Resting respiratory rate – when your dog is fast asleep, count how many breaths they have in one minute (one breath is in and out). If this number is above 30, your dog's congestive heart failure is not being ideally controlled and a call to your vet is important.

Coughing – Coughing can be a sign that the disease is progressing. If your dog starts coughing more frequently, your medication may need to be changed, or there may be something else happening inside those lungs. Call your vet to schedule a check-up.

Exercise tolerance – Your dog won't be running any marathons, but they should be able to comfortably go for walks, play for periods of time and move about easily in the home. If your dog suddenly seems lethargic, is unwilling to exercise or tires very quickly after activity, something isn't right.

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