

Ask the Vet: Don't overlook signs of heart disease in pets

By Craig Selby, DVM – Daisy Hill Animal Hospital, Ltd.

Lub-dub, Lub-dub – are the clear, regularly rhythmic sounds of the typical mammalian heartbeat. This is what every veterinarian likes to auscult, or listen to, during a physical examination. Changes in heart health can often lead to alterations of the normal heart sounds, as well as other exam findings.

Veterinarians cannot stress enough the value of physical examinations for wellness. Our pets usually don't come right out and tell us when an underlying problem exists; we rely heavily on comparative exams to keep a lookout for changes. The practice of veterinary medicine is a constant exercise in pulling puzzle pieces together to solve a problem. When we discover new abnormal heart sounds, murmurs, or rhythm disturbances during exams, we know immediately that some form of heart disease is already present. Then begins the task of characterizing the disease through some diagnostic testing to direct and monitor therapy appropriately.

You, the observant pet owners, are very important. If at home you can pick up on some of the common symptoms of heart disease, then you increase the chance of getting a diagnosis earlier. Early diagnosis is always better and improves the chance of a favorable response to therapy.

Now to be clear, there are different types of heart conditions that may develop in our pets, which have varying severity. Some heart diseases are present at birth, some have a genetic or breed-related basis, while others are acquired and develop gradually later in life. Aside from genetic predispositions, other risk factors for development of heart disease include advanced age, obesity, specific amino-acid deficiencies, periodontal infection, heartworm infection, high salt foods or snacks, and diseases in other organs.

The signs listed here are commonly associated with heart disease. Be aware that some signs may be confused with changes associated with aging such as decreased activity or behavior changes. When these signs are seen, then scheduling an appointment with your veterinarian is highly recommended. Signs may include the following:

Coughing – Minor coughs don't typically last more than a few days, but, of concern, is a cough that occurs during times of exertion or excitement or when trying to rest at night.

Difficulty breathing – Heart disease can directly affect the airways and can lead to shortness of breath or labored, rapid breathing.

Loss of appetite – This is almost always a sign of a concerning condition, but even more so when in combination with any of these other signs.

Weakness – A variety of illnesses can cause weakness, but it may also be a sign of underlying cardiac changes, especially in combination with a persistent cough or loss of appetite.

Weight loss or weight gain – Veterinarians routinely compare past and present weights during the physical exams, and being observant at home to any notable change is equally important. Changes in body shape, either from obvious weight loss or in development of a round pot-belly appearance, is common with heart disease.

Fainting or collapse – Arrhythmias can lead to significant blood pressure drops. Any form of collapse can potentially be life-threatening, and you should seek veterinary care if this ever occurs. Fainting can sometimes occur without any other outward signs of heart disease and may indicate a serious problem.

Restlessness – Pets that have arrhythmias, any type of difficulty breathing, or blood pressure disturbances often have difficulty relaxing. They are also more likely to have a poor appetite resulting in some weight loss.

Edema – Fluid pooling in the tissues of the legs is not a common early finding - coughing and loss of appetite are more common. But finding puffy, squishy or jiggly skin signals an immediate need for an exam.

After the physical exam, evaluation for heart disease includes blood and urine lab tests, heartworm testing, chest X-rays, and ECG studies to observe the electrical conduction through the heart muscle. A cardiac ultrasound should always be considered as it can provide the most detailed information about heart structure, function, and blood flow dynamics.

If your pet is ever diagnosed with heart disease, it is imperative to follow the medication instructions closely, and not to neglect any follow up diagnostic recommendations. Heart muscle, like many other tissues in the body, is in a constant state of change; therefore, medical therapy is often adjusted based on the response to therapy. The ultimate goal in heart disease therapy is to improve your pet's quality of life, comfort, and length of life.

The earlier any cardiac abnormalities are identified, the more therapeutic options there are available to help preserve the heart's function. Please consult with your veterinarian if your pet shows any of the above concerning signs.