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Canine Heart Failure - Early Diagnosis, Prompt Treatment

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Canine Heart Failure - Early Diagnosis, Prompt Treatment

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Early detection of clinical signs by the pet owner and selection of proper diagnostics and accurate interpretation of results by the veterinarian are important prerequisites for the treatment of heart failure in dogs. A commonly cited clinical definition of heart failure is exertional clinical signs caused by underlying heart disease. Many cases of early congestive heart failure can be identified by owners if they have been trained by the veterinary staff to routinely monitor their pet’s respiratory rate and effort. Early detection leads to prompt treatment, which in turn optimizes the time during which the pet can enjoy a healthier life.

In dogs, mitral valve disease (MVD) and dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) are the most common causes of heart failure, with prevalence being very high in certain breeds (90% for MVD in older Cavalier King Charles spaniels, 33%-50% for DCM in Doberman pinschers). Heart failure typically manifests in signs of either congestion (“backward heart failure”) or low cardiac output (“forward heart failure”).

**DIAGNOSIS OF HEART FAILURE**

Diagnosis of heart failure involves careful history taking, physical examination, and in cases of left-sided failure, thoracic radiography (see Radiographic Signs of Left-Sided Heart Failure). Echocardiography, electrocardiography, and blood pressure measurement add to the diagnostic database but often are not required to achieve a working diagnosis and to formulate an initial treatment plan.

In dogs with underlying MVD, the history typically involves a chronic murmur, increased respiratory rate and effort, coughing, poor appetite, and/or activity intolerance. Sometimes the signs are very subtle, but in the typical case, they are both persistent and progressive. In contrast, in cases of primary airway or respiratory disease, signs are often intermittent and absent in the resting or sleeping pet. Dogs with DCM show these signs as well but have a higher incidence of low-output signs, such as exercise intolerance, weakness, or syncopal episodes.

**PHYSICAL EXAMINATION AND DIAGNOSTICS**

In dogs with MVD or DCM, physical examination typically reveals a systolic heart murmur over the left apex. Heart rate is usually elevated and arrhythmias may be detected. Auscultation of the lung fields reveals increased bronchovesicular sounds or in some cases crackles. Pulmonary crackles are not specific to congestive heart failure; they are often detected in cases of primary lower airway or parenchymal disease.

In dogs with MVD, femoral pulse quality is usually normal, while those with DCM may have weak or thready pulses. In cases of tricuspid valve disease, advanced mitral valve disease with pulmonary hypertension, atrial fibrillation, or DCM, jugular vein distention or pulses can be detected.

When left-sided heart failure is suspected (pulmonary edema or pleural effusion), thoracic radiography is the diagnostic test of choice. In the absence of any of these findings, a diagnosis of congestive heart failure is in doubt and the veterinarian should consider extracardiac (respiratory) causes. When the dog exhibits some or all of these signs, however, ameliorative intervention should be instituted without delay.
TREATMENT OF HEART FAILURE

In 2009, the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine (ACVIM) released an expert consensus statement outlining recommendations for treatment of heart failure in dogs with MVD. There are fewer clinical trials to help formulate consensus guidelines for DCM, but in general the recommendations for MVD apply.

Appropriate treatment of first-time heart failure in dogs with MVD should include furosemide, pimobendan, and an ACE inhibitor (see “Treatment Guidelines”). The route and dose of furosemide administration depend on the degree of respiratory distress and disability. Experimental evidence and positive anecdotal experience by cardiology specialists indicate that pimobendan, a dual-acting vasodilator and positive inotrope, should also be administered acutely. ACE inhibitors are unlikely to substantially improve heart failure in the acute setting.

For home-based therapy in dogs recovering from acute heart failure or for initial therapy in dogs with milder heart failure, furosemide, furosemide, pimobendan, and ACE inhibition with enalapril or benazepril should be employed. Monitoring renal function before and 3 to 5 days after initiation of furosemide and an ACE inhibitor is recommended.

For use as chronic therapy, each of these three agents is supported by either extensive clinical anecodal experience (furosemide) or clinical trial data (pimobendan and ACE inhibitor).


The incidence of ventricular arrhythmias and sudden death is higher in cases of DCM than in MVD, leading to greater use of antiarrhythmic medications. This aspect of treatment is beyond the scope of this article.

PROGNOSIS

Preservation of quality of life is of primary importance to dog owners. In dogs with heart failure, quality of life can be improved with prompt and continuous use of pimobendan, diuretics, and an ACE inhibitor. Despite a guarded long-term prognosis, the pet can live a comfortable, high-quality life with early detection, accurate diagnosis, and immediate medical therapy.

REFERENCES

8. ACE = angiotensin-converting enzyme, DCM = dilated cardiomyopathy, MVD = mitral valve disease