

Congestive Heart Failure in Dogs

Heart failure (or “congestive heart failure”) is a term used in veterinary medicine to describe the heart’s inability to pump enough blood throughout the body to keep the circulatory system from “backing up.” Not only does this lead to a condition whereby fluid accumulates upstream of the failing chambers of the (right sided heart failure affects the animal differently than left sided heart failure), it means less blood—and therefore less oxygen—is getting to the tissues of the body. For this reason, heart failure is an unsustainable condition that must be quickly reversed if the animal is to survive.

What to Watch For

The symptoms of heart failure will differ depending on which side of the heart is affected, right or left.

Right-sided heart failure (backward failure):

- abdominal *distention* (*ascites*)
- exercise intolerance
- *lethargy*/weakness

Left-sided heart failure (forward failure):

- coughing
- breathing difficulty
- *lethargy*/weakness
- bluish skin/gums

Primary Cause

In pets, heart failure is most commonly the result of chronic valve disease (in which the valves of the heart degenerate and prove incompetent), abnormal heart rhythms (arrhythmias) and nutritional or hereditary conditions affecting the heart muscle or the major vessels leading to and from the heart. It should go without saying that the treatment of heart failure should address both symptoms and root cause(s).

Immediate Care

In cases of heart failure, the timing of treatment is critical.

1. Check for a pulse or heartbeat.
2. Squeeze the dog’s gums and see if blood runs back into them when you remove your fingers.
3. If the gums refill with blood, the heart is still active. You may need to give artificial respiration.
4. If the gums do not refill with blood, the heart has stopped. You will need to give CPR and artificial respiration.
5. Seek immediate veterinary care in all cases.

Because oxygen therapy and drug therapy is considered essential, hospitalization will be required.

Veterinary Care

Treatment

Long-term treatment is required in almost all heart failure cases in which the crisis has been overcome. Drug therapy, dietary changes and/or surgery (as in the case of some congenital heart defects), can be extremely effective in preventing future episodes, mitigating the overall severity of the underlying disease and increasing the quality of life.