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Heart Disease in Cats

The most common heart disease seen in cats is called Feline Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy (HCM). In this disease the muscle which forms the heart wall becomes very thickened. This means that the wall becomes stiffer and does not distend enough to allow complete filling. This means a lower blood volume is pumped into the body after each heartbeat. Eventually the heart chambers will dilate due to the increase pressure.

Initially there are no noticeable symptoms but with time the increased pressure in the heart results in fluid building up in the lungs (pulmonary oedema), in the space between the lungs and rib cage (pleural effusion) or in the abdomen (ascites). The location of the fluid depends on which side of the heart is affected.

HCM is an inheritable condition in Maine coon, Ragdolls and British shorthair cats. However, any cat can potentially develop the disease. The average age of cats diagnosed with HCM is 6 years, but it may range from 6 months to 16 years. Since the disease tends to be asymptomatic for many months, or even years, HCM is usually diagnosed when it is in an advanced stage and the cat has become symptomatic.

Clinical signs

If the fluid is in the lungs or pleural space this will cause an increase in the breathing rate and the cat will often show



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increased difficulty breathing. They may show decreased activity levels. If there is fluid in the abdomen you may notice that it looks swollen. Sometimes the only sign is that they are quiet and not eating well. Unfortunately, in some cases the signs can come on very suddenly and occasionally sudden death is reported.

Diagnosis

In some cases, a heart murmur may be present when your vet listens to your cat's heart. The heart rate may be much higher than normal and sometimes the rhythm is abnormal too.

If there is fluid present this will alter the lung sounds when your vet listens to the breathing and any fluid present in the abdomen if present in significant amounts will be detectable on clinical examination. An ultrasound scan of the heart can be used to measure the thickness of the heart muscle wall and to check for any chamber enlargement. An x-ray may indicate chamber enlargement and problems with fluid in the lungs, but thickened heart muscle will not show up on an x-ray.

Treatment

Unfortunately, even if HCM is detected on ultrasound before chamber enlargement has occurred, there are currently no drugs which prevent cats developing CHF in the future. High blood pressure sometimes develops and can be managed with tablets.

If congestive heart failure has developed then diuretics will be prescribed. The most commonly used diuretic is Furosemide. A new diuretic has been licensed in dogs called Torasemide, this is



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given once a day, it is possible that this will be licensed for cats in the future.

If the top part of the heart (the atrium) has become very enlarged there may be an increased risk of blood clots developing, and blood-thinning drugs may be recommended.

There is a lot of controversy about whether other heart medications e.g. beta blockers are helpful in cats. Studies show conflicting results and your vet will discuss what they think is best for your cat.

It is also worth noting that pilling some cats is extremely difficult and this may also limit treatment options in some cases as it is important to reduce stress. Frusemide is available as a liquid.

What is the prognosis for HCM?

Once a cat has developed congestive heart failure the survival time ranges from 6 to 18 months depending on how well they respond to treatment. It is vital that you continue giving medication as treatment is lifelong, the heart disease can be managed but not cured.

We will regularly check your cat to make sure they are responding well to medication and that the dose is correct. Once they are stable we will need to check them every 3-6 months to ensure that treatment is still suitable. This is a legal requirement, in line with the dispensing of all prescription medicines.



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If your cat shows any deterioration such as breathing problems, increased coughing, or reluctance to eat, arrange for your vet to check him or her over as soon as possible.

If your cat is overweight gradual weight loss will help reduce the strain on their heart. Other infections or illnesses may affect a pet with a heart condition particularly severely. Always consult your vet sooner rather than later if you are concerned regarding your pet's health.

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