

UNDERSTANDING CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE IN DOGS

What Is Congestive Heart Failure?

Congestive heart failure (CHF) occurs when the heart can no longer pump blood effectively, leading to fluid accumulation in the lungs and other parts of the body.

The most common cause in dogs is **myxomatous mitral valve disease (MMVD)**, where the mitral valve degenerates and allows blood to leak backward into the left atrium, causing the heart to work harder and eventually leading to CHF.

Recognizing the Signs

Early detection is crucial!

Signs of CHF may include:

- **Increased breathing rate or effort**, especially at rest
- **Coughing**, particularly at night or after exercise
- **Exercise intolerance** or lethargy
- **Fainting or collapse episodes**
- **Swollen abdomen** due to fluid accumulation
- **Pale or bluish gums**

Monitoring your dog's **resting respiratory rate (RRR)** can be helpful. A normal RRR is typically under 30 breaths per minute. An increase may indicate worsening heart function and should prompt veterinary evaluation.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis involves a combination of:

- **Physical examination:** Detecting heart murmurs or irregular rhythms
- **Thoracic radiographs (X-rays):** Assessing heart size and fluid in the lungs
- **Echocardiography (ultrasound):** Evaluating heart structure and function
- **Blood tests:** Including NT-proBNP to assess heart strain

Treatment Strategies

While CHF is a progressive condition, appropriate management can improve quality of life and longevity. Treatment may include:

1. Medications

- **Diuretics** (e.g., furosemide): Reduce fluid buildup
- **ACE inhibitors** (e.g., benazepril): Lower blood pressure and reduce heart workload
- **Pimobendan:** Enhances heart contractility and dilates blood vessels
- **Spironolactone:** A potassium-sparing diuretic that may provide additional benefits

2. Dietary Management

- **Low-sodium diets:** Help prevent fluid retention
- **Omega-3 fatty acid supplementation:** May reduce inflammation and support heart health
- **Maintaining optimal body weight:** Reduces cardiac workload

3. Lifestyle Adjustments

- **Exercise restriction:** Avoid strenuous activities; short, controlled walks are preferable
- **Stress reduction:** Minimize situations that may cause anxiety or excitement

Prognosis

The prognosis varies depending on the stage at diagnosis and response to treatment. With appropriate management, many dogs with CHF live **12 to 18 months** post-diagnosis, enjoying a good quality of life during this time .

Follow-Up and Monitoring

Regular veterinary check-ups are essential to monitor disease progression and adjust treatment as needed. Monitoring at home includes:

- **Daily RRR checks**
- **Observing for changes** in appetite, activity level, or breathing
- **Adherence to medication schedules**



**This handout is intended to provide general information.
For personalized advice and treatment plans, please consult your veterinarian.**