



Congestive Heart Failure

Congestive heart failure (CHF) is a syndrome that can develop due to a variety of underlying heart diseases. CHF causes excessive accumulation of fluid in the body as a result of failing cardiac function. When the left side of the heart fails, fluid accumulates within the lungs. When the right side of the heart fails, fluid accumulates around the lungs or within the abdomen. Left-sided CHF causes shortness of breath, coughing, exercise intolerance, lethargy, and in some cases, fainting episodes. Right-sided CHF leads to exercise intolerance, lethargy, a distended/pot-bellied abdomen, and in some cases, breathing difficulty or fainting episodes. CHF is diagnosed by visualizing abnormal fluid accumulation using x-rays or ultrasound.

Although CHF is a serious condition that must be treated with lifelong medications, the majority of pets can be successfully managed for a variable period of time while maintaining good quality of life. The mainstay of therapy for pets with CHF is a diuretic medication (water pill) known as furosemide. This medication helps eliminate the excessive water accumulation within the body and alleviates the symptoms of CHF. While taking this medication a pet will drink more water and will urinate more frequently. It is important that pets receiving furosemide have access to fresh water at all times. Furosemide can lead to excessive dehydration and electrolyte abnormalities so pets receiving this drug will need to have occasional blood tests to check their kidney function and electrolyte levels. As CHF worsens, additional diuretic medications may be needed in addition to furosemide to control fluid build-up and maintain quality of life.

Other common drugs that are given for the treatment of CHF include ACE-Inhibitors (Enalapril or Benazepril) and Pimobendan. ACE-Inhibitors are used to help dilate the blood vessels and to control some of the hormonal changes that happen within the body in response to CHF that can be detrimental over the long term. The most common side effects of ACE-Inhibitors are associated with the gastrointestinal system (anorexia, vomiting or diarrhea), however they can also have adverse effects on the kidneys. Pimobendan is a drug that is used to help increase the strength of the heart muscle's contraction. It can also help treat CHF by dilating the blood vessels and making it easier for blood to flow forward out of the heart. Pimobendan does not typically cause side effects, though diarrhea may occasionally be seen.

One of the best ways to monitor dogs and cats with CHF at home is to periodically check their resting respiratory rate. This is the number of times that they breathe in 1 minute when resting or asleep. Normal dogs and cats breathe 30 breaths per minute or less when resting. If the resting respiratory rate begins to gradually increase over time please alert your pet's veterinarian. This is often an early indication that fluid is reaccumulating within or around the lungs. A change in the dose of medication may be needed to prevent serious deterioration. If a pet with CHF ever has evidence of breathing distress or is consistently breathing 60 breaths per minute or more they should be taken to a veterinarian for treatment right away.