

**Well the Darling Buds of May are with us** and hopefully we are now enjoying some warmer weather. However it was a recent hot day in March when Molly staggered into my consulting room and fell panting to the floor. Her owner told me she had been very tired for some months and had recently developed a nasty cough. It soon became clear on examining her that she had heart problems which were causing her symptoms.

A heart problem can be present from birth; this is termed congenital heart disease. Or it can develop during the course of a dog's life-time, often in middle age; and is called acquired heart disease. Acquired heart disease accounts for around 95% of all heart conditions in dogs and usually affects either the heart valves or the heart muscle. Both of these acquired diseases can result in heart failure. Heart failure in dogs is not like a heart attack in people.

The term "heart failure" comes from the heart's inability to pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. This causes the dog to show signs or symptoms as the heart's performance declines over time. Whilst there is no cure for heart failure, it can usually be managed with medication and care.

Signs of heart failure can initially be quite mild and so may be difficult to pick up. However, as the disease progresses, the signs can become more severe as the heart's function deteriorates. This stage is known as congestive heart failure, when the heart is no longer able to pump sufficient blood around the body. These signs occur because of fluid build up or because the vital organs are not supplied with enough blood, and therefore the oxygen, they require. Signs include:

- ┌ Reduced ability to exercise
- ┌ Coughing
- ┌ Difficulty in breathing or a change to breathing rate
- ┌ Lack of energy or depressed appearance
- ┌ Poor appetite
- ┌ Weakness
- ┌ Anxiety and restlessness during the night
- ┌ Fainting

If your dog may have been diagnosed with a heart disease such as Mitral Valve Disease or Dilated Cardiomyopathy there are many things you can do to help your dog live a longer, better life.

## **Exercise**

Regular mild to moderate exercise is thought to be beneficial for dogs that have only mild signs or symptoms of heart disease. However, if your dog seems tired, stop exercising and allow them to rest. It is very important to seek your vet's advice about whether exercise is suitable for your dog and to what level. Some dogs may need complete rest.

Contact your vet if your pet collapses or seems very weak during activity.

## **Diet**

Your vet may recommend a change in diet. It is beneficial for dogs with heart disease not to be overweight as this can put more strain on their heart. Your vet may suggest a diet that could help to prevent weight gain or help with weight loss. Your vet may also discuss a diet for your dog that is low in salt to prevent them from retaining excess water. You should not make changes to your dog's diet without consulting your vet first.

## **Drugs**

There are many medications available to ease your dogs' symptoms of congestive heart failure. These can strengthen the force of your dogs' heart beat and help clear any retained fluid from its body. In many cases they can transform the quality of your dogs' life. Your vet will advise you on the best medication for your dog.

In Molly's case her life has been transformed. She is taking tablets every day which have stopped her cough and allowed her to enjoy her walks again. While she must take tablets for the rest of her life her owner feels this is a small price to pay for a dog she described as 'just like a puppy again'! If your dog is showing the symptoms of heart disease discussed above then talk to your Veterinary Surgeon now. Then hopefully they can join Molly in leading a new lease of life!



Molly

