Feline Arterial Thromboembolism

Feline arterial thromboembolism (FATE) is one of the most devastating consequences of cardiac disease in the feline patient. In cats with cardiomyopathy (heart muscle disease) an enlarged left atrium is a common secondary change. This enlarged left atrium is prone to decreased movement of blood. Spontaneous clot formation can occur within this slow moving and pooling blood. Clots within the left atrium can remain attached to the surface of the atrium or they can enter the circulation and block the arteries they enter.

Most commonly the clot will exit the heart, travel down the aorta, and lodge in the femoral arteries, thus interrupting blood flow to the rear legs. This is seen clinically as a sudden onset of weakness and inability to use the rear legs, pain, vocalization, and frequently respiratory difficulties. This is a medical emergency and prompt veterinary care should be obtained. Sadly, the clot could enter into any artery of the body as it exits the heart, so clinical signs can vary and include front limb lameness, inappropriate mentation, or even sudden death.

If your cat has an enlarged left atrium we may prescribe anti-platelet medications to help prevent the occurrence of an inappropriate blood clot. The most commonly utilized medications are aspirin and Plavix®, which are well tolerated in cats at appropriate doses. Choice of medication is dependent on the individual patient’s risk factors. Unfortunately, the development of a blood clot is unpredictable and can occur despite medication.

If the clot enters the circulation, the overall prognosis for the patient is guarded. However, with medical therapy and supportive care to help reduce further clot formation, control pain, treat heart failure if present, and promote collateral circulation, over 50% of our patients will survive the event. The road to recovery in these patients can be long and we cannot predict how quickly or completely an individual will regain function of the affected limb(s). Many of the cats that survive the initial episode will not have an additional event, however, some cats will have another clot event within 6 months despite anti-platelet therapy. Our goal is an open collaboration with you and your primary care veterinarian in order to optimize the quantity and quality of your feline companion’s life.