

HEART HEALTH *for* PETS

Cardiac Care for Pets (CVCA), www.cvcavets.com, is a collaborative group of board certified veterinary cardiologists serving Virginia and Maryland pet owners. It is the only group of its kind in the country and works out of specialty veterinary centers such as Dogwood Emergency Veterinary and Specialty Center here in Richmond. The group's advantage is more than the input from over 120 years of cardiology specialists, it's also the on-site expertise of other specialists if an issue turns out not to be heart related.

We hear a lot about arthritis and cancer, but Dr. Bill Tyrrell advised heart disease is indeed very common in dogs and cats. While most pets do not normally develop coronary disease as humans do, they are susceptible to a range of congenital heart disorders. Small mammals can also have heart problems; though not seen as often, CVCA has treated ferrets, rabbits and a guinea pig.

The most common issues treated by Dr. Tyrrell and CVCA are:

- Chronic degenerative valve disease which occurs in a large proportion of small dogs. Purebred Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, unfortunately, have nearly 100% chance of developing this disease as they age.
- Patent ductus arteriosus, the most common heart defect in dogs: where the structure that allows blood to flow from the right side into the lungs to become oxygenated doesn't close properly after birth resulting ultimately in congestive heart failure.
- Dilated cardiomyopathy, a heart muscle disease which causes a loss in muscle strength, and affects mostly giant breeds e.g. Dobermans, Great Danes and Newfoundlands. This can affect both young and old dogs.
- Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, affecting 8% to 20% of cats, is also a heart muscle disease that can obstruct the blood flowing out of the heart.

Diagnosing these conditions can start at home, advised Dr. Tyrrell; if a pet is more lethargic than normal, appears weak, dogs may cough, cats may stop eating, or if breathing becomes heavy or labored, it might be



a sign of a heart problem. Veterinary exams can detect heart murmurs which might also signal a larger problem.

CVCA's patients are referred from primary veterinarians for further evaluation. After a thorough examination, most will have an echocardiogram. CVCA uses state of the art equipment for this non-invasive ultra-sound procedure to view the entire heart. Our canine 'demo-dog', Riley, was a little nervous, because she thought she was going to get her nails cut, but was very patient as Dr. Tyrrell moved the probe along her chest. She passed with flying colors.

The echocardiogram measures blood flow in all heart chambers, muscle function, size and area of chambers and calculates ratios comparative to normal measurements. It's a painless procedure, exactly like that used with humans, that provides cardiologists with instant data.

Based on the severity of any of these diseases, Dr. Tyrrell advised that treatments include medications, and in more rare instances possible surgery. Outcomes vary based on the individual patient, but some can do quite well if the disease is caught early and the pet tolerates the medication well.

Dogs and cats might also be candidates for pace makers if they suffer from arrhythmias. Only about 1% of animal cardiology patients receive pace makers, but most do well with them. The devices are actually the same as those used in humans and come from a donated bank of equipment managed by the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine for use by veterinary cardiologists worldwide.

To decrease the possibility of acquiring heart problems which are not hereditary, Dr. Tyrrell suggests giving your pet plenty of healthy exercise to keep her weight down, limiting salt in her diet, and managing any diabetic issues.

There are fewer than 250 certified veterinary cardiologists in the world, so Richmond is fortunate to have this team available for our pet family members.