

## Heart Disease and Why Annual Check Ups are Important

Heart disease is common in dogs and cats and can be an important cause of illness. Unlike many other health problems, heart disease often profoundly limits a pet's survival. An important statistic for pet owners to consider is that about 10% of dogs that present to veterinarians for care suffer from heart disease. In cats, it has been reported that 15% of apparently healthy cats have an underlying heart condition. What these two statistics clearly tell me is that heart disease is prevalent and therefore annual checkups play a vital role in the early identification of heart disease and helping keep your pet healthy.

Heart disease in dogs and cats falls into two categories: congenital and acquired. Congenital problems manifest at birth and can be due to genetically inherited disorders, or arise from problems during pregnancy. Acquired disorders are more common, and usually develop in adulthood or old age. Recent research in veterinary medicine has identified some inherited disorders that occur later in life in purebred dogs such as the Boxer and Doberman pinscher, and in purebred cats like the Maine coon and Ragdoll. In the past several years, genetic tests have been developed to identify these heart disorders and more will be available in the near future.

An annual checkup is one of the very best opportunities to identify heart disease in dogs and cats. The annual physical examination includes an assessment of the heart with a stethoscope and evaluation of the peripheral arterial pulse. This examination allows your veterinarian to identify heart murmurs and arrhythmias, and assess if the heart is too weak. Heart murmurs occur when there are leaks in one of the four heart valves, or one of the valves does not open completely. An abnormal communication in the heart can also create a murmur. Arrhythmias are abnormalities of heart rhythm, causing the heart to beat irregularly, or too slow or too fast. Many forms of heart disease result in a weakened heart, which in turn can lead to heart failure, where the heart cannot pump a sufficient amount of blood through the body. While continuing to work harder to pump blood, further heart damage can occur. Early detection of these abnormalities through regular checkups helps your veterinarian identify the cause of the heart abnormality and its severity, which goes a long way toward early treatment and offers the best chance for a cure or long survival. Depending on the nature of your pet's heart condition, your veterinarian has an array of additional tests that can help identify and assess the severity of the heart disease. Chest x-rays are used to evaluate heart size and reveal congestion in the lungs, which is an indicator of a weakened heart. An electrocardiogram and 24-hour Holter exam can assess the heart rhythm. A cardiac ultrasound exam measures the strength of the heart and identifies structural defects. Recent work shows that early treatment with medication can have a significant effect on both survival and quality of life. As well, many congenital disorders can be treated and cured, but early detection and intervention are key to a good outcome.

The annual checkup is also the best means to help dog and cat breeders identify the healthiest purebred dogs for breeding purposes. This is an important way to limit the number of puppies with congenital and inherited disorders.

In conclusion, annual checkups are an essential way to keep your pet free of clinical signs of both heart disease and other disorders.

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