

# Congestive Heart Failure (CHF)



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## What is congestive heart failure?

Congestive heart failure (or simply “heart failure”) means that the heart is unable to pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. Congestive heart failure causes fluid to accumulate inside the lungs (pulmonary edema), or inside the chest or abdominal cavity (pleural or abdominal effusion, respectively). Heart failure often develops slowly over time; but can develop quickly if there is a sudden change in heart function. Common causes of heart failure include myxomatous mitral valve disease and dilated cardiomyopathy in dogs.

Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is a common cause in cats.

## How is congestive heart failure diagnosed?

There is no single test for diagnosis of heart failure. History, physical examination, heart, and lung imaging (thoracic radiographs, point-of-care ultrasound and/or echocardiogram) and serum biomarker tests and monitoring response to therapy may all play a role in the diagnosis.

Common clinical signs that pet owners may observe include shortness of breath, cough (dogs), loss of appetite, aloof behavior and lethargy, abdominal distention, weakness, fainting and exercise intolerance.

## How is congestive heart failure treated?

Medications are used to control the symptoms and fluid accumulations of congestive heart failure, but generally do not treat the underlying cause. Commonly used medications include diuretics (drugs that increase water and salt excretion from the kidneys such as furosemide, torsemide, and/or spironolactone), vasodilators (drugs that relax blood vessels such as enalapril, benazepril or amlodipine), and pimobendan, a drug that has two actions: to increase the strength of the heart muscle and vasodilation.

Other medications may also be used as well as periodic drainage of fluid from the abdomen or chest.

## How is congestive heart failure monitored by my veterinarian and my cardiologist?

After an initial diagnosis of heart failure, most patients will be rechecked soon afterward (3-14 days) to ensure that the medications and dosages are just right for the patient. Physical exam, radiographs, ultrasound, ECG, blood pressure and/or bloodwork may be performed. After the initial checkup, patients who are doing well on their medications are rechecked every 3-6 months contingent on their clinical progress; patients should always be seen prior to the next scheduled appointment if problems arise.

## How can I tell how my pet is doing at home?

The goal of therapy for heart failure is for your dog or cat to behave normally at home. Monitoring breathing rate when your pet is asleep will help detect the onset or recurrence of CHF. Normal respirations while sleeping or complete rest should be less than 30-36 breaths per minute, but a 20% increase over 2 days is concerning. Smartphone apps (Cardalis and Heart 2 Heart) simplify obtaining and tracking the breathing rate from a distance. Other signs that may indicate problems include decreased activity or appetite, coughing, weakness, fainting or belly distention.

## Is diet important?

It is important that your dog or cat continues to eat normally and maintain optimal body condition. Well balanced diets that contain high quality protein and modest salt restriction are generally recommended when possible. Non-traditional diets that are rich in legumes (lentils, chickpeas, and green peas/pea products) should be avoided.

These diets may be identified when legumes appear as part of the first 10 ingredients on the ingredient list. Avoid high salt treats and foods.

## What is the prognosis of heart failure?

Prognosis varies with the underlying cause of the heart failure, ability of the caregiver to administer medications (often an issue in cats), and concurrent diseases (such as concurrent kidney disease). For most patients with the common causes of heart failure, average survival time with medical therapy varies between 6 months and 2 years. Close monitoring and communication with your veterinary team will provide the best chance for increasing your pet's capacity for living a full life.

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