

Diltiazem

Diltiazem (brand names: Tiazac[®], Dilacor[®], Cardizem[®], others) has been added to your pet's therapy for heart disease. Diltiazem is a calcium channel blocker, a drug that changes the way the cells in the heart handle calcium during each heart contraction.

Diltiazem is most commonly used to slow the heart rate when tachycardia (fast heart rate) or an irregular heart rhythm is a feature of your pet's heart disease. Diltiazem also lowers blood pressure slightly. This medication may be used alone, or in combination with other medications like digoxin to slow the heart rate in patients with certain irregular heart rhythms, including atrial fibrillation and atrial tachycardia. Diltiazem can be used to treat these problems in both dogs and cats.

Diltiazem is available to be given as a three times per day medication, or a longer acting formulation may be given twice a day. Be sure that you follow your veterinarian's directions for the type of diltiazem that is prescribed for your pet. Your veterinarian may request that your pet have a follow-up electrocardiogram (ECG) performed within the first few weeks of diltiazem therapy to be sure that the heart rate is responding as anticipated. The dose may be adjusted if the heart rate has not decreased enough, or is too low.

Diltiazem usually does not cause severe side effects. In some cases, a patient's heart rates may drop too low in response to this drug. This would appear outwardly as lethargy or weakness. In some cases, animals may appear short of breath. Your veterinarian may request that you monitor your pet's heart rate in order to be sure that it remains in the target range. A video about taking your pet's heart rate can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqbzVEyUK9c> and a video about counting your pet's respiratory rate can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEptzj6G-Jk>. If you notice a sudden change in heart rate, shortness of breath or signs of weakness or lethargy when your pet is receiving diltiazem, please call your pet's consulting veterinarian or cardiologist immediately.

The best way to treat problems due to cardiac medications is to prevent them or to "catch" the problem early. Please call your pet's consulting veterinarian or cardiologist if you have any questions or problems with your pet's cardiac therapy.