



# Heart Disease and your Dog

In loving memory of Duke



The early signs of heart disease are often missed, especially in animals.

DR LARRY VAN NIEKERK

Dr Larry van Niekerk is a veterinary specialist surgeon, veterinary business consultant and speaker. He is founder and Chairman of the Institute for Veterinary Practice Development.

**Q** Sadly, your answers to my questions are too late for our beloved Labrador, Duke, whom we recently had to put down because of advanced heart failure, but I would still like to know the answers for our other dogs and in the hope that it can help other readers and their dogs.

Our Duke was very active even though he had started to cough, so we had no idea that it was connected to the heart; I actually thought it was an allergy. He was only fed good quality dog food and our vet was always amazed at how good he looked for his age. In fact he was in excellent health otherwise, which made the diagnosis of his heart disease so shocking for us.

When your dog starts coughing – which is one of the symptoms of heart failure – has their heart condition progressed already too far for successful treatment and are there much earlier signs that one should look out for?

Duke was on heart stimulants, anti-hypertension medication and diuretics. And lastly, I have also read that adding Taurine and L-Carnitine to their diet is beneficial for heart disease patients and also as a preventative when it comes to certain breeds like Spaniels and Retrievers. Have you heard of this at all and could you advise further?

Lynne Taljaard – Cape Town

**A** Your vet would understand the link between the coughing and the congestion of fluid that starts to build up in the lungs as the heart becomes less effective.

The only earlier signs you might have noticed would be an increase in the breathing rate, sleeping upright, perhaps some anxiety and less tolerance to exercise, and a distended abdomen.

The reason why it seems sudden is because the body has several ways of compensating for the weaker heart muscle and eventually just cannot cope and needs help.

Your veterinarian would be the best person to contact regarding choice of medication and cost as he has the insight into the patient's condition.

Taurine and L-Carnitine are recommended for certain breeds once the disease has been diagnosed and is included in prescription heart diets.

## Taking care of your dog's heart



Medications are aimed at assisting the heart muscle to contract more effectively and stabilising the heart rate.

very difficult for your veterinarian to predict how long the animal will live, save to say that many animals go on to lead healthy, active lives.

Lifestyle changes include –

- Controlled natural exercise. Exercise should never be forced but carefully controlled so as not to strain the heart.
- Changes in diet.
- Cardiac medication.

Heart patients, especially older dogs, will often have obesity and kidney problems that need attention to make medication more effective. Prescription diets are available from your veterinarian. These specific foods will contain the correct amounts of energy, less salt and also Taurine and L-Carnitine, which is necessary for certain breeds.

Medications are aimed at assisting the heart muscle to contract more effectively and stabilising the heart rate. They assist in opening up the blood vessels and decreasing blood pressure, as well as to help the patient get rid of excess fluid which might have dammed up in the lungs or abdomen.

Regular check-ups are part of the routine as the medication will need to be altered according to how well the heart is being assisted by the lifestyle changes and medication. 🐾

**T**he early signs of heart disease are often missed, especially in animals. The body has ways to compensate for a failing heart, and it is only when the body cannot cope anymore that the clinical signs of heart failure become evident.

There are mainly three types of heart disease. These affect the heart rate, the muscle's ability to pump or valve disease. Heart valve disease is seen more in small breeds, and weakened flabby heart muscle in the larger breeds.

All end with the clinical signs of heart failure resulting from the heart's inability to pump blood to the tissues, so we see signs of "damming up", depending on which side of the heart fails, in the lungs, abdomen or tissues that become poorly supplied with blood.

### AFTER DIAGNOSIS

Once the diagnosis and cause of the heart failure is made, you have to accept that treatment is lifelong and requires a new routine of

### The early signs of heart failure are –

- ▶ Weakness and exercise intolerance.
- ▶ Increased rate of breathing.
- ▶ Restless pacing.
- ▶ Anxiety.
- ▶ Sleeping upright or resting head on furniture.
- ▶ Coughing.
- ▶ A distended abdomen.
- ▶ Fainting and disorientation.

The animal's age and breed type, together with the clinical signs, will give your veterinarian clues as to where to look and what further tests are needed to ascertain what treatment is necessary. These may include an X-ray of heart and lungs, echocardiography, an electrocardiogram and blood tests.

regular check-ups and medication, exactly the same as you would with a human with heart disease. It is