



Ventricular Septal Defect

(Type of Heart Birth Defect)

Basics

OVERVIEW

- The heart of the dog or cat is composed of four chambers; the top two chambers are the right and left atria and the bottom two chambers are the right and left ventricles
- “Ventricular septal defect” is a type of heart birth defect due to an abnormal communication between the two ventricles
- One of the most common congenital (present at birth) heart malformations in cats; less common in dogs
- Also known as VSD

GENETICS

- Greater likelihood of having ventricular septal defect is recognized in certain breeds; genetic transmission has not been established

SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION OF PET

Species

- Dogs
- Cats

Breed Predispositions

- English bulldog, English springer spaniel, basset hound, Akita, West Highland white terrier, Lakeland terrier

Mean Age and Range

- Most defects detected during routine examination of puppies and kittens

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES IN THE PET

- Usually no clinical signs
- Heart murmur or abnormal heart sounds may be heard when listening to the heart with a stethoscope
- Femoral pulses usually are normal
- Gums and moist tissues of the body (known as “mucous membranes”)—usually pink, unless high blood pressure in the lungs (known as “pulmonary hypertension”) causes a right-to-left flow of blood through the ventricular septal defect, leading to decreased oxygen in the blood (known as “hypoxemia”)
- May have signs of left-sided congestive heart failure (CHF), such as exercise intolerance, fainting (known as “syncope”), and cough; “congestive heart failure” is a condition in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body's needs
- Rapid heart rate (known as “tachycardia”), difficulty breathing (known as “dyspnea”), and short, rough snoring

sounds (known as “crackles”) heard when listening to the heart with a stethoscope may be evident if left-sided CHF occurs

CAUSES

- Congenital (present at birth) disease; may have a genetic basis

Treatment

HEALTH CARE

- Clinical signs are related to congestive heart failure (in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body's needs); most pets can be treated as outpatients

ACTIVITY

- Restrict if the pet has congestive heart failure (in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body's needs)
- No need to restrict activity in pets without clinical signs (known as “asymptomatic patients”) with small ventricular septal defects

DIET

- Moderate sodium restriction recommended for pets with congestive heart failure (in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body's needs)

SURGERY

- Only a minority of pets with ventricular septal defect have large enough defects to warrant surgical repair
- Consider surgical repair of the ventricular septal defect; requires heart-lung (cardiopulmonary) bypass for defects associated with a large shunt—cardiopulmonary bypass presently is performed at a small number of veterinary centers
- Consider pulmonary artery banding as a means to control signs and to improve the pet's condition, but not to cure the ventricular septal defect (known as a “palliative procedure”) for pets with moderate or large shunts and congestive heart failure (in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body's needs)
- Transcatheter closure of ventricular septal defect may be beneficial in some pets

Medications

Medications presented in this section are intended to provide general information about possible treatment. The treatment for a particular condition may evolve as medical advances are made; therefore, the medications should not be considered as all inclusive

- Treatment of pets with congestive heart failure (in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body's needs)—medications to remove excess fluid from the body (known as “diuretics,” such as furosemide) and heart medications (such as enalapril, pimobendan, and, in some pets, digoxin)

Follow-Up Care

PATIENT MONITORING

- Periodic echocardiographic (use of ultrasound to evaluate the heart and major blood vessels) or x-ray (radiographic) evaluation suggested for pets without clinical signs

PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- Breeding affected pets is not recommended

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Left-sided congestive failure (in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body's needs)
- Bacterial infection of the lining of the heart (known as “bacterial endocarditis”)
- High blood pressure in the lungs (pulmonary hypertension)
- Irregular heartbeats (known as “arrhythmias”)

EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Pets with small shunts may have a normal lifespan; some ventricular septal defects may not cause clinical signs
- Co-existent heart abnormalities worsen the prognosis
- Pets with obvious congestive heart failure (in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body's needs) may live 6–18 months with medical treatment
- The development of high blood pressure in the lungs (pulmonary hypertension) and reversal of blood flow (right to left through the ventricular septal defect) is uncommon, but generally associated with a poor prognosis

Key Points

- Definitive surgical correction of ventricular septal defect is not widely available
- If congestive heart failure (in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body's needs) develops, the condition is terminal, even with medical care
- Pets with obvious congestive heart failure may live 6–18 months with medical treatment

Notes

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