

Does Your Pet Exhibit This Odd Symptom? Watch for Heart Disease

You'd probably never guess this one on your own. But if your dog does this in the morning, evening, or when rising from a sitting or reclining position, see your vet. Especially if combined with these other key symptoms. Cats show some, but not all, of these same symptoms.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Both dogs and cats can develop heart disease. It is usually an acquired condition, and is most commonly seen in middle-aged and older pets
- Early intervention improves the long-term prognosis for pets with heart disease. Alert guardians are usually the first to notice a problem with their dog or cat
- Heart disease symptoms are often more difficult to detect in cats than in dogs
- Steps you can take to support your pet's heart health include feeding a species-appropriate diet and keeping your dog or cat at a healthy body weight

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published October 22, 2015.

Unfortunately, it's common for both dogs and cats to develop heart disease. The cardiovascular system is incredibly complex and involves many organs and biochemical processes that must work together seamlessly to keep your pet healthy. When this intricate system begins to malfunction, there will be gradual or sometimes sudden changes in your dog or cat.

Early detection of a potential heart condition can make a significant difference in how well and how long your pet lives after diagnosis.

Signs That Can Signal a Problem with Your Pet's Heart

- **Coughing** — A recent, persistent cough that is worse at night, or when your pet has been laying down, or stands up from a sitting or reclining position is one of the more obvious signs of a potential issue with the heart. Cats with heart disease usually don't cough.
- **Exercise intolerance** — If your pet seems to be moving around less and is reluctant to play or exercise, it's a red flag. She may begin to wear out after just a short exercise session, and you may notice she's breathing heavier after exertion. Another sign is purplish or pale gums.
- **Respiratory distress** — Pets with a heart problem often have an increased respiration rate during sleep. A normal respiration rate is under 32 breaths per minute, and you can check your pet's rate by counting the rises or falls of his chest for one minute.

If he's taking more than 32 breaths per minute or you notice there is an abdominal effort to breathe, it may indicate a heart problem.

- **Behavior changes** — In a dog, look for increased or generalized restlessness, especially at night, as though she can't decide where to lie down. In cats, withdrawing or hiding can be a sign of compromised heart function.
- **Fainting or collapsing** — If heart disease is severe or advanced, pets may faint or collapse. Cats may experience collapsing episodes accompanied by paralysis of the front or back legs, and vocalization. These are clearly signs of a very serious medical emergency and your pet needs to see a veterinarian right away.
- **Weight fluctuations** — Pets with long-term heart disease typically experience weight loss, but weight gain is also possible as a result of fluid accumulation in the abdomen. Look for a bloated or pot belly.

Common Types of Heart Disease in Dogs

The heart disease mortality rate in canine companions is on the rise for a couple of reasons. Number one, advances in veterinary medicine are helping dogs live longer, and the longer a body lives, the more opportunity it has to get sick.

The second big reason for heart disease in pet dogs is the biologically inappropriate, highly processed diets many dogs are fed throughout their lives.

Heart disease in canines can be congenital (hereditary), but the vast majority of cases (95%) are acquired. It is typically a condition of middle-aged and older dogs, and involves either the heart muscle itself, or the valves of the heart.

Common heart disorders in dogs include:

- **Valvular disease** — Heart valve problems are the most common type of canine heart disease. The valves of the heart weaken with age and begin to leak when the heart muscle pumps.
- **Heartworm disease** — Mosquitoes are the carriers. The worms take up residence in the heart and cause disease.
- **Myocarditis** — An inflammation of the heart caused by infection (usually bacterial). Myocarditis both weakens and enlarges the heart muscle.
- **Pericardial disease**, in which the protective sac around a dog's heart fills with liquid, interfering with the normal beating mechanism.
- **Arrhythmia**, which is an irregular heartbeat brought on by a problem with the body's electrical control system.

Interestingly, one of the most common reasons for heart disease in humans, blocked arteries, is rare in dogs.

Symptoms of Canine Heart Disease

Some of the more obvious, general symptoms of a heart problem include:

- Coughing
- Body swelling
- Fatigue, weakness

- Bluish tinge to the tongue
- Loss of appetite
- Rapid or very slow heartbeat

One or more of these signs can come on suddenly, be very noticeable and disturbing, and should prompt you to make an appointment with your dog's veterinarian right away.

Additional symptoms of heart disease, which can be mistaken for other problems or simple signs of aging include:

- Reluctance to exercise or play
- Collapsing or fainting
- Dry cough after exercise; cough that worsens at night
- Pot belly
- Breathing difficulties
- Rapid weight loss

A Common Type of Heart Disease in Cats: Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy

Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM) is common in cats, but rarely seen in dogs. The word "hypertrophic" means thickened, so this is a condition in which the walls and ventricles of the heart become much too thick, or hypertrophied.

Several other diseases also cause thickening of the left ventricular wall, including aortic stenosis, hyperthyroidism, and systemic hypertension (high blood pressure). HCM is diagnosed once other causes have been ruled out.

Feline HCM can be an inherited disease. There's a test available for a specific gene mutation in Maine Coons and Ragdolls. Persians and other oriental breeds are also predisposed.

Most of the time, however, it's the regular housecat that is diagnosed with HCM. Cats usually develop the condition in midlife, but it can occur at any age.

Symptoms of Feline Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy

Symptoms of HCM in kitties vary and depend to some extent on the severity of the disease. Cats with mild disease often have no obvious symptoms. But in a cat with significant HCM, there are usually signs.

Felines mask illness very well. Unfortunately, this means that until the HCM is severe, even a cat with significant disease may show no signs of it, or have very mild symptoms that don't seem to be indicative of heart disease.

In cats with obvious symptoms, there can be respiratory distress caused by congestive heart failure, or leg paralysis due to a blood clot.

It's important to note that kitties suffering from congestive heart failure don't cough like people and dogs do. Instead,

they tend to breathe through an open mouth, and there can even be some panting. You should watch for breathing difficulties during exertion. Some kitties with HCM and congestive heart failure have a hard time walking any distance without stopping to rest and recuperate.

Helping Your Pet Avoid Heart Disease

You can reduce the chance your dog or kitty will acquire heart problems by taking the following steps:

- Feed a human-grade, meat-based diet, and eliminate all fillers such as grains and unnecessary carbohydrates
- Help your pet maintain a healthy body weight through regular aerobic exercise
- Take excellent care of your pet's dental health (bacteria from dirty mouths have been linked to heart valve infections)

Also talk to your holistic or integrative veterinarian about cardiovascular support supplements such as ubiquinol, amino acids (taurine, L-arginine, and acetyl L-carnitine), hawthorn berries, d-ribose, TMG heart glandulars, and homeopathic and TCM formulas that specifically fit your pet's symptoms.

Finally, ask your veterinarian for a proBNP blood test. This test can give you peace of mind that your pet has no early signs of heart disease. It's a simple blood test with a fast turn-around time that can provide the information you need to proactively manage your dog's or cat's heart health.

Sources and References

[Santa Barbara Independent August 26, 2014](#)
