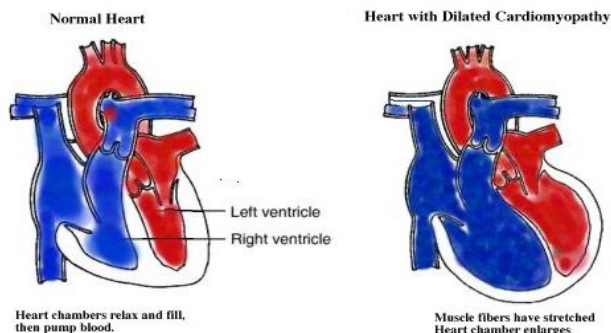


Dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) is one of the most common acquired heart diseases. Large and giant breed dogs are most often affected, but it has been diagnosed in smaller breed dog and in cats as well.

WHAT IS DILATED CARDIOMYOPATHY?



DCM defines a condition where the heart muscle (myocardium) becomes very thin and is unable to contract normally. Since the myocardium cannot work effectively to pump blood out of the heart, the heart becomes enlarged. Subsequent back up of blood into the left atrium and ultimately into the lungs occurs commonly. This back up of blood into the lungs results in pulmonary edema and is a sign of congestive heart failure.

WHAT CAUSES DCM?

It is believed that the majority of cases have a familial or genetic component. Specific breeds such as the Doberman pinscher, great dane or boxer however, are over represented.

There is a small population of dogs in which DCM may have a nutritional component. Vegetarian and grain free diets have been implicated as a cause. Supplementation of deficient amino acids may not correct the problem.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF DCM?

The signs of DCM can vary widely and may depend on the breed of dog. Coughing, labored breathing, episodic weakness, fainting, as well as fluid accumulation in the abdomen (ascites) or in the chest cavity (pleural effusion) are not uncommon signs. Other signs may include loss of appetite, pale gums, elevated heart rate or lethargy.

HOW IS DCM DIAGNOSED?

Often, a thorough physical exam, coupled with the signs and the breed, are sufficient to make a presumptive diagnosis of DCM. An electrocardiogram and radiographs of the chest, as well as an ultrasound of the heart (echocardiogram) may be recommended.

HOW IS DCM TREATED?

Unfortunately, DCM is not reversible. However; there are certain medications that may help for a period of time. Some of the more commonly used drugs are: diuretics; drugs that may help increase the contractile ability of the heart; drugs that may decrease the heart rate; or drugs that decrease the work that the heart has to do to function.

PROGNOSIS

Even with optimal therapy, the long-term survival of patients with DCM is highly variable. Initial response to therapy may also play a role in determining long-term prognosis.