



Chelsea Animal Hospital Inc.

Anne M. Carroll, DVM, CVA
Emma Basham, DVM

276 VT Rte 110 - PO Box 277
Chelsea, Vermont 05038
(802) 685-3232

Alternatively Speaking: A Holistic Look at Matters of the Heart Dr. Anne Carroll DVM, CVA

Humans are used to constantly hearing about heart health in the news, but this is not a typical focus for animals since it is a far less common issue for them. However that changed this July after the FDA issued a statement regarding a possible dietary link to heart disease in dogs. Veterinarians are still investigating this mystery and it may turn out not to be diet related, but now seems a good time to look at how diet is related to heart health, what breeds are prone to heart conditions, and how to prevent and treat heart disease holistically in both dogs and cats. Before we get into the dietary connection, let's look at the bigger picture of heart function in our furry friends.

The heart is certainly an amazing organ. With each heartbeat, the left muscular side of heart pumps oxygen and nutrient-rich blood around the body and back to the heart, while at the same time the right chambers are sending returned blood back to the lungs to re-oxygenate. An electrical system in the heart muscle synchronizes contractions and valve openings to rapidly move blood. We can compare this modern description to the Chinese portrait of the heart, which has its roots in intuition and observation. They equally recognized the heart's vital role in maintaining life but more poetically describe it as "the shape of a closed lotus flower", situated underneath the lung and above the liver, where it functions as Master of the blood and vessels. Emperor of the body, it has a dual function of also being the seat of consciousness and intelligence, or "shen". The emotion and the physical are considered intertwined. This rings true in modern times where we 'follow our hearts' for making important decisions, and feel our heart beats change with emotional joy or sorrow. Chinese medicine describes in depth the patterns of disorder that would result in heart disease, and the heart's link to the kidney, more than we can cover here. Suffice to say, Chinese medicine offers a different perspective from which to assess the patient along with acupuncture and herbal tools we can integrate with modern medicine to help extend quality of life for our heart patients.

Both Western and Eastern perspectives agree that the heart provides essential circulation to feed the entire body, including the heart itself, which needs a good supply of oxygen and nutrients to be able to exercise nonstop. The heart's need for nutrition increases in disease since it is working harder to pump blood when it is weakened by damage and trying to heal itself. Even before damage occurs, nutrition affects the development of heart disease. Certain breeds such as Newfoundlands, Boxers, Great Danes, Dobermans and Cocker Spaniels can have trouble assimilating taurine, an amino acid found in meat. Affected dogs need higher levels of dietary supplementation to avoid damage to their heart muscle. In contrast, smaller breeds like Miniature Poodles, Yorkies and Beagles tend to develop problems with their valves as they age. In either group, part of this genetic tendency may involve a tendency to have inflammatory damage to their hearts. Studies have found a link between inflammation markers and heart disease in cats and dogs, and that inflammation is often a result of dietary stresses. Because of these links, nutritional supplements and therapeutic foods are a mainstay of holistic treatment of heart disease.

As an example we can look at the case of "Kellyn", an 8 ½ year old Doberman who seemed tired, and was diagnosed with heart failure. Dobermans are especially prone to heart disease, and like other large dogs the disease is silent until the heart muscle is so damaged they go into failure. His cardiologist started him on medications, and advised his owner that his expected survival was 6 months. We started him on nutritional supplements specific to supporting the diseased heart. At his recheck ultrasound a month and a half later, his cardiologist was amazed at how much improvement he had, beyond the effects his heart drugs would have on his condition. Kellyn continued on supports for a year and a half before his liver failed as a result of his heart disease at the age of ten.

As important as nutrition is, without improved circulation those nutrients can't reach the heart well. As in Kellyn's case of heart failure, often drug therapy is needed to restore circulation to give us time to use other therapies. But sometimes the drugs can cause problems too, so in our practice we use acupuncture and Chinese herbs with or to replace drugs when needed. "Alfie" the cat and "Sana" the Pomeranian are good examples of this.

Alfie was a cat determined to use up all of his nine lives. Adopted in middle age, he was allergic, and then diagnosed with heart failure when poor circulation created fluid build-up in his lungs and weakness from lack of blood supply. His heart did better on medications for several months but his kidneys declined, so they had to cut back and in the meantime the new meds for his allergies aggravated his liver. So he came to us on six medications trying to juggle all his issues but he was still very itchy and not eating or feeling well. Over a period of time we used herbs, medications and nutrition to alleviate the allergies, and as those helped we slowly removed or reduced some of the drugs we felt may be bothering him. From a Chinese perspective, heart failure is a stagnation of Qi (energy), Blood and fluids in the Upper Burner (chest). So we used Chinese herbs to address that pattern and Alfie was able to feel better on fewer drugs, which also helped his kidneys and liver feel better. He lived a year and a half longer with a good quality of life overall, far exceeding our expectations given where he started from.

Sana the little Pomeranian was seen for a routine checkup, but in listening to her heart a murmur was heard. Murmurs are the sound of blood turbulence created when the valves are allowing blood to flow backwards in the heart. She was feeling well but the ultrasound of her heart showed that her heart was close to failure and the cardiologist gave her medications to use if she began to cough. When she started the heart medications, like Alfie she did not tolerate the drugs and her kidney failure was suddenly worse than her heart disease. She was not eating, her weight dropped dangerously, and she would fall over trying to walk. We used nutrition, acupuncture, and herbs for her heart and kidneys, and it took months but she slowly stabilized and eventually returned to her old self. At her recheck a year later her murmur was improved and since she could not take any other medications, her cardiologist felt she did not need another ultrasound. She did finally pass at the age of 16, almost three years after she began treatment.

These cases all involved advanced disease, and we always encourage early diagnosis or better yet prevention when possible to improve success. Especially if you have a breed at risk, prevention is invaluable with heart disease! Starting when young we encourage nutritional supplementation and a diet including fresh ingredients to reduce inflammation. Knowing the effects of emotional stress on the body, we address anxiety, timidity or anger in all patients since those are signs of imbalances that affect health over time, not just the heart. Annual checkups are very important to detect murmurs, allowing us to start early supports to minimize the use of drugs. As little dogs age, owners can watch for coughs or reduced ability to exercise. For at-risk large breeds we suggest an ultrasound between the age of 4 and 6 to see if the heart muscle is showing signs of disease before failure occurs that is seen outwardly. For cats, disease is often unpredictable and silent until it reaches advanced stages. The best prevention is avoiding processed dry cat foods and obesity to reduce the metabolic stress and inflammation in a carnivore trying to process starchy materials they are not designed to eat.

So as usual, we end up talking about diet as a major factor in health. This brings us full circle to that FDA statement about diet and heart disease. The reason these handful of cases are drawing attention is that the dogs affected were not the typical breeds, but instead Retrievers, Whippets, a Shih Tzu, a Bulldog, Miniature Schnauzers, and even some mixed breeds. Veterinarians are focusing on a possible dietary cause because we saw the same issue in cats getting inadequate taurine in the first diets made in the mid 60's. Dogs have never had that issue, but the trend in dog food today is to feed unheard of quantities of potatoes, peas, chickpeas, and lentils in place of undesirable grains. So far, we have no idea why these dogs developed heart disease, since most of them had normal taurine levels when tested. It may be that there is a limit to how many non-animal proteins you can use in dog food, or something unrelated to diet at all. In the meantime, no matter what dry or canned foods you feed your pet, consider some form of fresh meat as part of their diet, or a taurine supplement. Talk to your holistic veterinarian about what would be appropriate for your pet's individual needs and how to introduce that. And until the time when advances in science can explain this and the other medical mysteries out there, we can rely on the poetry of Chinese medicine and the inherent knowledge of whole food nutrition to promote health for not just the heart, but the whole.

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she and her associates practice conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at www.chelseanimalhospital.com.