

Mitral Valve Disease

Degeneration of the Mitral Valve, known as Mitral Valve Disease (MVD) is a condition to which Cavalier King Charles Spaniels are genetically predisposed. Although in some cases MVD may shorten the life of a Cavalier, many individuals still live past the average lifespan for the breed despite having symptoms of the problem.

MVD is by far the most common of canine heart problems, accounting for about 75% of all heart disease diagnosed in dogs. It is usually a normal ageing condition in both animals and humans and is more prevalent in small dog breeds than in larger breeds. It affects over one third of all dogs older than 10 years, but in Cavaliers, the onset of the condition can occur at a younger age and this predisposition is genetically inherited.

The first sign of possible Mitral Valve Disease is the development of a heart murmur on the left side of the heart. However, this is not necessarily a cause for great concern as a dog with a heart murmur may still live a long, healthy life, depending up the progression of the disease in that particular dog.

In a healthy heart the mitral valve allows the blood to flow from the left atrium into the left ventricle without any back flow. Degeneration of the mitral valve allows an amount of blood to flow back into the left atrium, thus placing strain on this chamber of the heart, making it less efficient and causing a heart murmur. Over time increasing degeneration may eventually place too much stress on the heart and lead to congestive heart failure.

Heart murmurs are graded according to their severity with Grade One indicating a very mild murmur. Grade Six indicates a severe murmur and the latter stages of congestive heart failure.

In the early stages of MVD there are no visible symptoms and the owner will not notice anything amiss. However, the vet will be able to hear a turbulent, swishing sound in the heart which indicates the presence of a heart murmur.

As the degeneration of the mitral valve increases to a more serious level, symptoms will include unwillingness to exercise, and an increased respiratory rate. Later, as fluid begins to build up in the lungs, coughing and laboured breathing will be observed. Medication can be used to stabilise the heart and reduce the buildup of fluid in the lungs, thus improving the dog's quality of life.

Many dogs live for years with a low grade murmur and their chances of a longer life are definitely increased if they are fed a healthy, natural diet and not permitted to become at all overweight.

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