

Congenital heart diseases



Bringing a new kitten into the family is an exciting time and should a time of great joy. It can be particularly distressing to find that your new arrival has a problem. It is important that you get your new kitten checked over by your vet so that any obvious problems can be identified before you become too attached to it.

What is a congenital disease?

Congenital defects are caused by abnormal development of the foetus and disease is present from the time that the animal is born. However, although the disease is present from birth, signs may not be noticed until later in life.

Congenital defects can occur in any part of the body and the heart is no exception. The heart is a complicated structure and as it develops there are many things that can go wrong.

Why has my pet got heart disease?

As many as 1 in 100 cats have a congenital heart problem. No-one knows why the heart develops abnormally in some animals. It is probably usually the result of a combination of environmental conditions and genetic factors. Some diseases are more common in particular breeds and so it is likely that they are partly passed from parents to offspring. For this reason animals with congenital diseases should not be allowed to breed.

What are the signs of heart disease?

If defects are severe then signs can be marked, but in some cases you may not ever know that there is something wrong with your pet. Often one of the first signs of a heart defect is a heart murmur detected by a vet during routine examination. When you buy a new kitten you should take them to your vet so that your vet can check them over. Your vet should listen to their heart and will be able to tell if a murmur is present. However there are some diseases that cause no signs in the early stages.

If heart disease progresses then an animal with a congenital condition can go on to develop heart failure. This may occur relatively quickly within the first few weeks of months of life if the defect is serious. However in many cases no signs are shown until the animal reaches adulthood.

What heart diseases are common?

There are a number of congenital heart diseases and some of these more commonly affect some breeds of cat than others. The diseases are caused by abnormal development of the blood vessels (abnormal connections or narrowing), the valves or as a result of abnormal connection between different parts of the heart (hole in the heart).

In cats the most common form of congenital heart disease is a 'hole in the heart' (which is rare in dogs). Sometimes there is abnormal development of the valves between the various chambers of the heart. Other defects include PDA (patent ductus arteriosus) where there is a communication between blood supply into and out of the heart; narrowing of the large blood vessel taking blood away from the heart to the body (aortic stenosis). Male cats are more likely to have a congenital heart disease than females.

How do vets diagnose heart defects?

If your vet detects a heart murmur on examination they will need to do further tests in order to find out what is causing the problem. X-rays might help but ultrasound will be needed to find out exactly what is wrong with the heart. Your vet may need to refer your pet to a vet who specialises in heart disease for detailed examination. This will allow the best treatment plan to be formulated.

Can congenital heart disease be treated?

Unfortunately the long-term outlook for animals with severe congenital heart disease is usually not good. The only cure for heart defects is surgical correction and this is rarely performed in cats. In some cases animals have no problems with their disease and can live with the condition. If animals develop heart failure then this can be managed with drugs to control signs.

Will my pet get better?

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If your pet can have surgery to correct their heart defect they will probably need to be sent to a specialist surgeon. However recovery from the operation is usually rapid and they may be back to normal in a week or two. Unfortunately if there is no surgical option for your pet then they may need drug treatment for the rest of their life. It can be very distressing to watch a young animal suffer with heart disease and, if there is no treatment for your pet, you should discuss with your vet whether euthanasia might be the kindest option.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact Orwell Veterinary Group on 01473 333677 and we will be happy to advise you.