

Chronic Degenerative Valve Disease in Dogs



Introduction: Why Heart Health Matters

Heart disease is a significant concern for dogs, especially as they age. Among all conditions, **Chronic Degenerative Valve Disease (CDVD)** – also called myxomatous mitral valve disease (MMVD) – is by far the most common. It accounts for more than three out of every four cases of canine heart disease and remains the leading cause of congestive heart failure in dogs.

At Coast To Coast Cardiology, we see CDVD patients every day. This guide is designed to help you understand how the disease develops, what signs to look for, how it is diagnosed, and what treatment and monitoring options are available so that your dog can enjoy the best possible quality of life.

What Is Chronic Degenerative Valve Disease?

Chronic Degenerative Valve Disease is a progressive disorder that most often affects the mitral valve. In a healthy heart, valves open and close precisely, ensuring that blood flows forward and never leaks backward. In dogs with CDVD, the valve tissue gradually thickens, changes shape, and loses its ability to seal. This results in backward leakage of blood into the left atrium, a process called mitral regurgitation. Over time, the extra workload on the heart causes the left atrium and ventricle to enlarge, the muscle fibers to weaken, and the disease eventually to progress to congestive heart failure when fluid accumulates in the lungs or abdomen.

Although any dog can develop CDVD, it is especially common in small to medium breeds such as Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, Dachshunds, Toy Poodles, Chihuahuas, Miniature Schnauzers, and Yorkshire Terriers. Age is the single greatest risk factor, with most cases diagnosed in middle to senior years, though Cavaliers often develop murmurs much earlier. Males are also slightly more predisposed than females.

Recognizing Symptoms at Home

In the earliest stages, CDVD can be completely silent, and the only clue may be a new heart murmur discovered during a routine exam. As the disease progresses, owners may notice their dogs coughing, especially at night or after lying down, or breathing more rapidly and with greater effort. Dogs that once had endless energy on walks may begin to tire easily, slow down, or even refuse exercise. Some may become restless at night, faint during exertion, or develop a swollen belly as fluid builds up in advanced disease. Because these symptoms overlap with many other illnesses, proper testing is essential for a correct diagnosis.

How Is CDVD Diagnosed?

Veterinary cardiologists use a combination of tools to confirm valve disease and assess its severity. Echocardiography – an ultrasound of the heart – is the gold standard. This non-invasive test allows us to see valve thickening, measure the degree of leakage, assess heart chamber enlargement, and evaluate overall pumping strength. Chest radiographs are often used to check whether fluid is present in the lungs and to evaluate the shape of the heart. Electrocardiograms (ECGs) can reveal electrical disturbances or arrhythmias that may complicate the disease. In some cases, blood tests such as NT-proBNP help distinguish whether respiratory issues are due to heart failure or other lung conditions. Blood pressure measurement is also valuable, as hypertension can make regurgitation worse. By combining these tools, we can build a complete picture of your dog's heart health and create a management plan that fits their stage of disease.

Staging the Disease

To standardize care, veterinary cardiologists use the ACVIM staging system, which outlines how CDVD progresses over time. Each stage carries different implications for monitoring and treatment:

- **Stage A** – Dogs that are predisposed to CDVD (for example, certain breeds) but have no murmur yet.
- **Stage B1** – A heart murmur is present, but the heart is not enlarged and no symptoms are evident.
- **Stage B2** – A murmur is present along with measurable enlargement of the heart, but the dog still shows no outward symptoms.
- **Stage C** – Clinical signs of congestive heart failure begin to appear, such as coughing, difficulty breathing, or fluid buildup in the lungs or abdomen.
- **Stage D** – End-stage disease, in which symptoms persist despite aggressive therapy and quality of life becomes more difficult to maintain.

Understanding which stage your dog is in allows your cardiologist to tailor both treatment decisions and follow-up plans. It also helps owners anticipate what to expect as the disease progresses.

Treatment and Management

The right treatment depends on the stage of disease. Dogs in Stage B1 usually do not require medication but should be monitored closely with periodic exams and imaging. In Stage B2, evidence shows that starting pimobendan can delay the onset of congestive heart failure and extend survival time. Once dogs reach Stage C, treatment often involves diuretics to remove fluid, pimobendan to improve pumping function, and ACE inhibitors to reduce the workload on the heart. In more advanced cases, additional medications such as spironolactone or antiarrhythmics may be necessary. Dogs in Stage D often require complex, multi-drug regimens and sometimes hospitalization to stabilize crises. Although the condition cannot be cured, modern cardiology has transformed CDVD from a rapidly fatal disease into one that can often be managed for years with the right combination of monitoring and therapy.

Life at Home With a Dog With CDVD

Living with a dog who has heart disease requires careful observation and a commitment to their care, but it can also be deeply rewarding. Monitoring your dog's resting respiratory rate at home provides an early warning if fluid is starting to build up again. Giving medications consistently and on schedule is essential, as missing doses can quickly set back progress. A lower-sodium diet may be recommended to minimize fluid retention. While strenuous activity should be avoided, gentle daily exercise and maintaining an appropriate weight are beneficial. Most importantly, keeping up with scheduled follow-up exams and echocardiograms allows us to make adjustments before complications arise.

Prognosis and Quality of Life

The outlook for dogs with CDVD varies depending on when it is diagnosed and how quickly it progresses. Dogs in the earliest stages may live many years before developing symptoms. Those in Stage B2 who begin pimobendan often remain stable for more than a year before showing signs of congestive heart failure. Dogs with CHF typically live twelve months on average after onset, though many live longer with proper management. What matters most is that with early detection and dedicated care, many dogs enjoy excellent quality of life for years after diagnosis.

Supporting Families Through the Journey

Learning that your dog has heart disease can feel overwhelming. Many owners worry about recognizing signs of decline or whether their pet will suffer. At Coast To Coast Cardiology, we place just as much emphasis on supporting families as we do on treating pets. We provide education on what to expect, guidance on monitoring at home, and reassurance about when to call for help. With clear communication and consistent follow-up, families feel empowered and confident in caring for their pets while preserving both longevity and comfort.

How Coast To Coast Cardiology Can Help

At Coast To Coast Cardiology, we specialize in diagnosing and managing CDVD at every stage. Our services include advanced echocardiography for accurate staging, personalized treatment and monitoring plans, emergency stabilization during congestive heart failure, and long-term management programs to extend both survival and quality of life. We work closely with your primary veterinarian to ensure seamless, coordinated care.

If your dog has been diagnosed with a heart murmur or valve disease, or if you have concerns about their heart health, we encourage you to visit our specialty cardiology services page to learn how we can help. Together, we can provide your dog with advanced care and compassionate support throughout every stage of this journey.