

Ask A Vet: King Charles and His Heart

Sunday, July 19, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I have a King Charles spaniel, and was reading about them online. Apparently they have heart problems, mainly heart murmurs. What are heart murmurs and should I be concerned?

-Worried Pup Parent

Dear Reader,

King Charles Spaniels are wonderful dogs; they are loving dogs and have such a great demeanor. It is true that they are predisposed to having heart problems. The most common problem is called mitral valve regurgitation. This means a valve within the heart allows blood to flow in the wrong direction. The sound produced is called a murmur and is made by turbulent flow of blood within the heart. This is detected when your veterinarian listens to your dog's heart. There is a grading system associated with this, which your doctor can explain if and when your dog develops a murmur.

Most frequently, murmurs are detected during your pet's annual exam. However, frequently dogs will present with a history of labored or fast breathing, fainting, not wanting to play or go for a walk, or coughing. Frequently, your veterinarian will start by listening to your dog's heart and lungs to find any evidence of a heart problem.

When a murmur is detected and graded, your veterinarian will want to take radiographs (x-ray images) of your dog's heart. This allows us to measure the size of the heart and look for any changes within the lungs that can be caused by the heart. If your dog is not showing any signs (such as listed above), then the usual recommendation is to listen to your dog's heart every 3 to 6 months and monitor for changes. If your dog is showing any of the signs above and has changes to the heart's size, then we will start medications. Many of the medications dispensed are similar to or the same as the medications for humans with heart disease. Depending on the severity of the murmur, your veterinarian will often recommend or offer a referral to a cardiologist. These are veterinarians who are specialized in dealing with the heart. This will add some expense, but is worth the cost to fully understand all of the issues affecting your pet's heart.

The goal of heart therapy is to make it as efficient as possible. We rarely can completely fix the heart, but we can stabilize the disease. If signs worsen, your dog can develop heart failure. Again, there are some medications to help the heart. This is as serious as heart failure in people you may know. Sometimes hospitalization is required to put your pet on oxygen and receive around-the-clock medications.

Dogs predisposed to heart disease are: King Charles Spaniels, Chihuahuas, Dobermans, Miniature Schnauzers, Boston Terriers, and Cocker Spaniels. Any dog can develop a murmur, though. If your dog is diagnosed with a murmur, be sure to talk about this disease fully with your veterinarian and share any concerns you have.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman