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The EPIC Study

This study (performed by cardiologists at the Royal Veterinary College) was to assess the benefit of starting medication (Pimobendan) in dogs with enlarged hearts due to degenerative mitral valve disease but without any symptoms.

Mitral valve disease is not uncommon in older small breed dogs, especially Cavalier King Charles Spaniels and terrier breeds. It is due to degeneration of one of the valves in the heart. Normally all blood flows through the heart in the same direction. When the mitral valve degenerates it starts to leak causing backflow of blood. This can lead to certain parts of the heart becoming enlarged, which can eventually lead to congestive heart failure, causing fluid to build up around the body, most commonly in the lungs, causing breathing difficulties and a moist sounding cough.

Treatment has previously been recommended only when symptoms occur.

The EPIC study identified dogs that were not symptomatic of heart disease but that had a heart murmur suggestive of mitral valve disease and were small breeds (4-15kg) aged 6 years or over. Those dogs that had evidence of heart enlargement on scan and Xray were enrolled into the study. Dogs received either pimobendan or placebo. Time to development of heart failure and survival times were compared between groups. Dogs given pimobendan had significantly longer survival times as well as significantly longer times until developing congestive heart failure. The difference between groups was so marked that the study was terminated early so that all of the dogs could be started on medication.

Based on these study findings we are now recommending treatment of dogs with mitral valve disease and enlarged hearts at an earlier stage to ensure that they have a better quality of life for longer.

We will listen to your dogs heart in the complimentary consultation, and if we identify a heart murmur that is suggestive of mitral valve disease (there are other causes of heart murmurs); we will recommend ultrasound scanning of the heart (echocardiography) at a special reduced rate of £50 (can be up to £130 for a full scan). The scan can normally be performed without sedation or anaesthetic and requires only a small area of coat to be clipped on the side of the chest.

In dogs that are found to have enlargement of the heart lifelong treatment with pimobendan will be recommended.