



## Heart Health for Pets

**W**e know pets make our hearts go pitter-patter, so show your love for them by taking care of theirs. Because early intervention can mean a more positive prognosis, we asked expert cardiologists for their advice on what to look for and how to keep pets' tickers healthy.

BY LIZZ SCHUMER

## 1 Spot Signs of Trouble

Heart disease can go undetected for years until pets come in with serious symptoms, explains Steven Rosenthal,

D.V.M., a cardiologist at CVCA Cardiac Care for Pets, so learn to catch the early signs. Observing a resting breathing rate of more than 35 breaths per minute is the best way to detect progressive heart disease in pets, Rosenthal says. The difference between panting and distressed breathing is that with the latter, pets will be breathing rapidly with effort, explains Phillip Fox, D.V.M., head of cardiology and director of the Caspary Research Institute and education outreach at Animal Medical Center. Other signs can include unexplained weight loss or gain, lowered tolerance to exercise, loss of appetite, restlessness or hiding, and a persistent cough in dogs. As disease progresses, pets may faint or collapse or have a swollen abdomen. If you see any of these signs, head to the vet right away.

## 2 Treat the Problem

If your pet does get diagnosed with a heart condition, treatment and prognosis will depend on their age and specific condition as well as how early and accurately it was diagnosed. "By catching the process earlier, we can slow the progression of the disease," Rosenthal says. That's just one reason annual vet visits are important for all cats and dogs (twice-annual visits once they reach middle age). For dogs or cats with a heart murmur, an irregular heartbeat, an enlarged heart, or other conditions affecting the heart, your vet may want to set visits every three to six months to monitor them, says Fox. "Working with a veterinarian who has experience with patients with heart disease and heart failure to help formulate a full plan is ultimately going to give you the best result," Rosenthal explains. "We like to see patients earlier to establish a baseline to compare with future evaluations and fine-tune the protocol."

## 3 Practice Prevention

Just as for people, staying active and eating a nutritious diet can help keep your pet's heart (and the rest of their body) in good shape, Rosenthal notes. While there are many special diets and supplements on the market, both experts recommend talking to your vet before trying specialty foods or pills, since they may not be suitable for your pet. One medication they do recommend is heartworm preventives. A parasite spread by mosquito bites that affects the heart, heartworm can be deadly for both dogs and cats, though it's more common in canines. "It's a low-risk treatment and a devastating disorder if they're exposed to it," Rosenthal says. Ask your vet which type of heartworm treatment is best for your pet and their lifestyle.